

UNDER THE SHADOW
OF DREAD

A DRAMA



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OF DREAD



A DRAMA

BY

R. T. H.



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DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

ALFRED, King of West Saxons.

WYTTEKIN, }
CEAWLIN, } Ealdormen.

EDWY, }
BEOWULF, } Friends to Ceawlin.
CYNEWULF, }

Other friends to Ceawlin.

WIDOLT, a Thegn.

OFFA, a Priest.

OSWALD, }
SIGURD, } Servants to Wyttekin.

DENEWULF, a Neatherd.

GUTHRUM, a Sea King of the Danes; afterwards christened
Athelstane.

OSRIC, a Jarl.

ELSWITHA, Queen to King Alfred.

GWENELINE, Daughter to Wyttekin.

GILDA, her kinswoman.

HERKHA, wife to Denewulf.

Nobles, Ladies, Attendants, Messengers, &c.

ACT I.

SCENE I. *A forest adjacent to the castle of the Ealdorman Wyttekin: discovers Sigurd and Oswald at their vocation as woodmen.*

Sigurd. Beshrew me! but the day is hot. Old man Satan, I ween, has his fires uncommon close.

Oswald. Maybe, Sigurd, but in thy fat inside, for 'tis my thought that the day is nigh chilly.

Sigurd. Thou whey-faced hog-begot, keep thy surly looks to fright the crows withal. Chilly! Out upon thee! where's the tankard? let's have a draught—(*drinks deeply*)—Ho! that's better. Now a man may feel himself a—a phil-osopher, that the word for't—a phil-osopher—well! Wouldst have a song?

Oswald. Ay.

Sigurd. Here 'tis then; I learned it of my grandsire.

SONG.

Ho, ho, ho, ho, for the lusty wood-life,
A woodman merry to be.
Go whet mine axe, my steel-tongued axe.
Ho, ho, to hear the little birds pipe
All in the greenwood tree—
Too-ee, To-ee, twit-wit.

Ho, ho, ho, ho, for the lusty wood-life,
A woodman merry to be.
Mine axe is whetted, my steel-tongued axe.
Ho, ho, to hear the little birds pipe
As I fell the greenwood tree—
Ee-wee, Ee-wee, wee-wit.

Sigurd. What think'st thou of 't, laddie?

Oswald. The words be indifferent good.

Sigurd. And likest thou the sentiment?

Oswald. Ay.

Sigurd. So say not I. Give me the jolly life and not the woodman's; 'tis too sweating a concern for me—art glum, man: wherefore so? Hath the latest mistress jilted thee?

Oswald. No, thou fat-bellied fellow, no; but thinking on our country's wrongs, a man must needs be glum.

Sigurd. Bah! thou canst not heal a wound by thinking on't. What boots it who rules o'er us? So one has a moderate computation of labour,—harkee, a moderate one say I; an easeful lie-upon to rest one o' nights; no fleas to perturb one's slumber; warm clothes; good cheer; and aye anon a merry wench to sport with: who heeds whether we be ruled o'er by Danes, or Franks, or cranks? Faith, not I.

Oswald. Take shame to thyself for saying of those words. Why man, hast no honour?

Sigurd. Honour! quotha?—a merry jest—honour!—know'st not the by-word, "Profit off, honour naught"?

Oswald. Knaves' jargon, methinks.

Sigurd. Knaves', an thou wilt, fools', never. By the Fiend his fork! so Honour brings not advantage to Sigurd, Sigurd jilts Honour; ergo, mine honest, Honour is bereft of Sigurd, and Sigurd is bereft of rags—ah, away! speed! the Danes!

(*Enter Osric.*)

Osric. Why away, good fellows? Be not affrighted, I come in peace; as earnest of which, here's your hand of gold—(*giving them money*); but (*to Oswald*) leave me with thy comrade awhile: I would have speech of him. Not a word, sirrah, that thou hast spied me here; the world will not be large enow to cloak thee from my vengeance else—remember!

Oswald. Base Dane, I scorn the handling of thy ill-gotten gold: take it to fill thy man-eating belly withal; I'll have none of it (*casting it down*).

Sigurd. Is that thy mode of speaking to gentlefolk? An thou wilt not take the gold, take this thou whining whelp. (*Strikes him, Oswald falls.*)

Oswald. O! dear God, slain by my countryman!

Osric. A death blow, I fear me, tho' the gods forfend it. Haste, fellow, see to him. Riddle my heart! and I liked not the churl's courage. Thy action was too hasty; mayhap we could have chained his tongue otherwise.

Sigurd. Perturb not thy mind, my lord, his tongue will not bite more below.

Osric. Well, draw thou closer, friend; I would have speech of thee, but we must hold it circumspect; speak soft, I pray thee, soft. A servant thou of the Ealdorman Wyttekin?

Sigurd. Ay, my good lord.

Osríc. He has a secret passage to his castle thou wottest of?

Sigurd. O!

Osríc. Come, sirrah, deny not. Thou wilt guide me through this path at the hour of night I acquaint thee of, doing thy best endeavour to have thy fellow defenders deep in drink aforetime? Say thou wilt do this, and thou art rich for life.

Sigurd. My lord!

Osríc. No squirmings, sirrah—bethink thee, rich for life: thou dost consent?

Sigurd. Ah—ah—yea, my lord, but—the gold, when shall I have the handling of't?

Osríc. Thou dost consent—good; the hour and signal 'twixt us, then, (*whispering to him*)—thou understandest? and this for that thou wottest of; the rest anon—(*handing him further gold*) but shouldst thou prove false, I shall have thee torn limb from limb should twenty seas divide us.

Sigurd. My lord, fear thee not, I am thy man.

Osríc. 'Tis well.

Sigurd. My labouring hours are o'er; humbly do I take leave of your lordship. My lord, farewell.

Osríc. Farewell, sirrah, and fail me not I counsel thee.

Sigurd. Thy servant, I'll not fail thee.—(*Aside*) Faith, an he fails me with his gold, he and his Danes will fail not to feed Mother Earth, ha, ha! Marry! this is life, to have my fill at little cost; though right glad am I to be out of ken of his eye—methought 'twould have devoured me.

(*Exit.*)

Osric. How justly did I judge my man, and yet,
Although I use't, the weapon I despise.—
Ah Gold,
Ah wondrous god, no secret lock's secure
From thy all-opening key.
A wight is inconvenient to his spouse?
Gold will conveniently dispose of him:
Is there a man in honourable rags?
Gold will corrupt them to dishonourable purple:
"I do possess a peerless gem," thou say'st,
"Bright honesty." Comes subtle Gold along:
"My strength 'gainst thine," quoth he, "That
gem the prize."

A contest, long or short,—Gold hath thy gem!
O, may Gold then be favourable to the purpose
For which I am all aflame to have accomplished;
O, may the Night her curtain soon draw down,
That I may hie to Gweneline—that name
Which for these many months with scourging
force

Has through each vein and sinew of my being
Thrilled, till no longer can I hold the curb
Of my fierce passion in; she shall be mine,
I swear it—hist! the tramp of foemen's feet;
I must away—belike it is our foes!

*(Exit—then a blast of trumpets: enter King Alfred
with a guard).*

King Alfred. O friends, we have not had a day as
this,
So pleasant, no for many a tedious month.
Sure 'tis a glorious wood that we have chanced
on,
And I bethink me now that hereabouts

Resides the Ealdorman Lord Wyttekin.
 Much could we wish to seek his presence, yet
 We may not tarry now—soft ho! what's this?
 One of our subjects in an evil plight:
 Go, one of you, see to his hurt.

Retainer. My liege,

He's grievous stunned, but there is life in him.

King Alfred. Ah, raise him up, good fellows, bear
 him softly.

Retainer. There is that cot we passed a while ago:

Should it be there we bear him to, my lord?

King Alfred. Ay, thitherward, as gently as may be;
 Ourselves shall see his wounds are tended to.

How came he by them, think ye?

Retainer. Please't my liege,

A woodman's life is fraught with mishap, so,
 Perchance, some weighted branches strook him
 down

Whiles he was felling.

King Alfred. Ay, 'tis very like.

Poor churl! but we must haste us. Ere the night
 Sets in, we've many a mile to wend; friends, on.

(Exeunt King Alfred and retainers, bearing Oswald.)

SCENE II.—*The Ealdorman Wyttekin's castle: a
 room in the same. Enter Gweneline and Ceawlin.*

Ceawlin. What joy, what bliss is mine!

Blest thought, to think that ere the warming sun
 Has kist but twain more days, we shall be one!

O ecstasy beyond all words! my heart

Is as a stream lost in its sea of bliss.

Gweneline. Yea, loved one, yea,

Mine, eke, is trembling with its rosy load.—

Ah, pray repeat those words, those words divine,
Thou lovest me, again, again: to me
They never surfeit; have perpetual youth;
And to my fond and doting ears are like
The prolongation of an angel's whisper.

Ceawlin. Lo, here is writ the answer on these lips,
Dear coral sheets, again, again; and, love,
An I keep not my faith, may crippled Age
Torment my limbs with all his aging tools;
Untimely snow descend upon this head;
And may I be the butt of every gibe
And scullion jest; may children jeer, all men
Deride; and may the sun of friendship ne'er
Light up my baneful days until, at last,
I go dishonoured, unremembered to the grave.

Gweneline. Thou dost affright me with those high,
wild words:
Dost ween that Gweneline doubts her lord's
troth?

(*Enter Guilda, unobserved.*)

Guilda. O heavy sight!
O cruel traitors, Eyes, why didst not draw
Your blinds opaque to veil this wound from me?
O Ears, why did you exercise your functions?—
Ah me! Ah me! what thoughts are these, my
heart,
Thou freest from out thy keep? They must be
chained
With sterner bonds.
Steel thee, steel thee, to play the better part,—
Aye to rejoice in others' happiness,
Although it costs thee thine.

Gweneline (*observing her*). Hail, gentle coz.

What thinkest thou?—my love and I, next day
But one, are to be wed.

Gilda. What tidings, coz!

Take from my heart best wishes, both of you,
For many prosperous days; and may high
Heaven

Be pleased to send you happiness and peace.

Gweneline. Thanks, sister ours,—

Pray, grant us leave to use that sweeter title:
It is the only one that doth befit
Our love and dear esteem for thee.

Ceawlin. Why, yes!

Or else thou shalt be begging for a name—
But out! alack! that hated elf, Farewell,
Has long been beckoning, so I must away.

Gweneline. Say'st thou?—abide a wee whit longer,
do.

Ceawlin. Nay, temptress, nay, else I could ne'er be
gone.

Adieu, my love; (*embracing her*) fair sister,
grant me leave, (*to Gilda*)

Thou know'st it is a brother's toll.

Gilda. (*Aside*) Still! Still!

Be still, O rebel heart.

Gweneline and Gilda. Adieu, Adieu.

(*Exit Ceawlin.*)

Gweneline. My Gilda, I am not wise, but this I am
sure of:

'Tis love,—that wee sweet word,—that gives the
earth

Its brightest hues; that traces with soft brush
Those tints on little birds' refulgent wings,

And prompts the strains of trembling melody
 Which issue from the swelling throats; and, coz.,
 It surely lightens up earth's dreariest waste,
 Its pain. I sometimes think when musing this:
 Love is a breath of incense, pure, benign
 Beyond imagining, which has escaped
 From Heaven, and entered—sweet celestial guest,
 Our sin-corroded and untuneful hearts.
 Bereft of it, I really dare not think
 What hollow form the earth would take. I know
 The blushing pansy would not give me joy;
 The rose would all in vain be witching; e'en
 Shy violets, my favourite flower, would waft
 Their perfumed breath, and yet enchant me not:
 Of charm there truly would be none at all;
 The world would be a living tomb, a place
 From whence all life had fled—but cousin, why!
 Thou look'st most strangely white?

Gilda. My Gweneline,

'Tis but that pain which passes through my head
 At times, and weakens through its tediousness—
 A matter of small moment; mind me not.

Gweneline. Ah, take those waters on the chest.

Gilda. Not so,

'Twill soon have vanished; pray, be not
 uneaseful.

Gweneline. Forgive me, dearest, for my selfishness—
 Selfish indeed, aprattling all the while
 Of mine own happiness—forgetting thine.

Gilda. That is not so, nor am I thanking thee
 For thinking thine is not *my* happiness.
 Prithee, I yearn to hear more of thy lord.

Gweneline. That shall not be, O cousin, for I wait
 To hear thee tell of my lord Edwy—Ah!

Thou blushest, Guilda, ah!

Guilda. I wait, my cousin.

Gweneline. Faith, coz, I speak no more for penitence.

Guilda. I wait, O cousin mine.

Gweneline. I spin, O cousin.

(Spinning for an interval—suddenly loud cries are heard.)

Hark! List! What's that?—Dear God! Look, cousin, Look! *(she gazes out)*

Our castle is surrounded by the Danes—

They fight, they fight—but where are all our men?

Not half are here—methinks, a traitor's hand

Is in't, a viper we have took to bosom;—

And do mine eyes speak false?—no, no, my sire

Took prisoner, woe's me! and Ceawlin?

Where, where is he? Perchance, if Fate be fair,

His steed has borne him safe away. Ah, steed,

If that be so, how dear I love thee—O!

(Enter Osric.)

Osric. My due respects unto your Highnesses:

Ladies, be not afeard, I come in peace.

Gweneline. An thou hast aught of mercy, spare, we pray,

Two maidens sore distressed—thy purpose, sir?

Osric. Do I address the Lady Gweneline?

Gweneline. Such is my name.

Osric. And would it like thee, lady,

That we have speech alone?

Gweneline. This lady, sir,

This lady is my other self: two breasts

We hold in common; prithee, then, acquaint

Our ears with that thou hast to say.

Osric. Then be it so,

Although I fain would have it otherwise.—
Lady, to pierce the frontier-line of speech,
I stand in some perplexity: I know not
How to attune my rough, untutored tongue
To thy refined ear,—forgive me that;
For naught else have I heard full many a year
But the uncivil, currish voice of war;
And thus my words are of the battlefield
More than beseems a maiden's peaceful bower:
But should your Highness deign to lend an
hearing

Unto a soldier's laboured speech, I would
Deliver me of my mind's habitant.
So I unfold, O peerless lady, this:
That for three irksome months my pilgrim
thoughts

Have bled their course to thee, nor rested aught
Sith my first glimpse of heavenly radiance;
And that, although I cannot bow the knee,
Spout pretty froth, cast up protesting eyes,
Mince, prate,—vow that my lady's cheeks are—
tut!

That uncouth haviour of love's malady,
Those foibles of the tender, blushing youth;
I say I love thee with a soldier's bluntness;
Yea, and the kernel of the theme to come to,
I ne'er will have a satisfaction full
Until thy hand is won.

Gweneline. Thou speakest fair,

Else my astounded ears must have rebelled
To list to thee; but thou must know, good sir,
That which thou askest for can never be.—
My mind is steeped in sad reflection,

So I must of thy pity make request,
That thou wilt leave us to ourselves awhile.

Osric. Nay, lady, hear thou this, depart I not
Until I gain my suit.

Gweneline. Hold there, wild Dane!

Dost thou mistake our bower for our roast-room?
Our person for a kitchen wench? Go to!
How durst thou, sir, speak thus to us a princess
Of the blood royal of England—boastful Dane,
Dost ween, albeit now the conqueror,
That thou may'st force a high-born Saxon maid
To stoop to infamy?

Osric. (*Aside*) Faith! I like her spirit!

How dares say'st thou? and thus I answer thee:
How dares the blustering wind kiss with rude
breath

The roses' lids? How dares the muddy stream
To nestle to the Ocean?—so: they love,
As love I thee, and who dares askest thou?
Why, *Osric*, Jarl of Denmark.

Gweneline. Speak and quick,

An thou hast more gross insults for mine ear,
For, sir, my Saxon blood is warming so,
I may forget I am a woman.

Osric. Then,

This my blunt question: wilt thou wed with me
Or no?

Gweneline. No! that's thy answer, leave us, pray.

Osric. O, lady, think again, I pray thee,—list:

An thou wilt not the offer of my love
Accept, thy sire now in bonds must die;
Thyself and friend will to my fellow Danes
Be given o'er as prey, and, thou well know'st,
Anent a maiden's chastity, they hold
No nice regard.

Gweneline. (*Aside to Guilda*) My God! what shall I do?

Guilda. My cousin, do thou sue for a reprieve:
I fear me 'tis the only stay we have.

Gweneline. Ah, I had little thought that any man
Should have a heart so guiltless of a shred
Of pity: 'tis a libel on those laws
Which Nature in us plants;—that it is so,
Makes me thy suitor for a space of time
Wherein I may perpend this weighty theme:
For thrice-count months I beg.

Osric. It shall be so,
Although each day be as eternity;
But, lady, this condition must prevail;—
Thou and thy friend, as prisoners of mine,
Must in a cottage bide nigh to our camp;
There treated ye shall be right estimably;
I pledge my honour on't.

Gweneline. Thy honour, sir, thy honour!
I trust it not. I know full well ye Danes
Are blessed with so much of it, that ye e'en,
Of superfluity, pledge it all away.

Osric. Then on this holy bracelet do I swear

(*Producing one and kissing it.*)

Gweneline. (*Aside to Guilda*)
For all our sakes, it must, it must be so;
May God protect us—cousin, sayest thou?

Guilda. Yes, dearest, 'tis—alas! our only course.

Gweneline. We must, perforce, yield to thy wicked-
ness;—

But tell me, sir, the Ealdorman, my sire,
How wilt thou treat his person?

Osric. E'en as ye.

Gweneline. And, Dane, thou darest to do this?

Osríc. Dare I?

I dare do anything.

Gweneline. Were I, base Dane,

Of thy stern sex, thou'd dearly rue thy deeds.

But tell me, pray, what are your prisoners?—

What slain of Saxons?

Osríc. None but menials.

Gweneline. (*Aside*) O, please it God, he's safe! I
thank thee, sir;

But now we leave thee to prepare us 'gainst

Our dreaded march,—when, prithee, may that
be?

Osríc. At sunrise, ladies, so that likes you, too.

Gweneline. We shall be ready, sir. Give thee Good
E'en.

(*suddenly turning round*)

Base coward! traitor! O, my love, my love!

(*Weeps—exit Guilda supporting Gweneline. The
scene closes.*)

SCENE III.—*A room in the Ealdorman Ceawlin's
castle: Ceawlin's friends feasting.*

Edwy. I do protest to you, sirs, 'tis the truth,
Which ye can well determine, so ye seek
My sire's kinsman, Ulric of the Marsh,
Who was amongst the goodly retinue
Accompanying our king—the prince, then, sirs,
And numbering, peradventure, eighteen summers.
My uncle was, I say, of the king's train,
And thus his tale, which, pray you, pay all
heed to.

The king was wending homewards from the chase
 What time the Twilight hour traced elfic shapes
 O'er hillock, dell, and sward, when he espied
 A gleam of white amidst the forest gloom,
 And, coming towards it, lo! it was a child,
 A tender little maiden robed in white,
 Who when she spied him, stood at first with fear
 Transfixed; but at the Prince's kindly look
 Her fear did vanish, and she raised her large
 Soft eyes full on him with an holy trust.
 The Prince then took her to him, questioned her:
 Who is thy sire? Where dost thou bide, my
 sweet?

No word she gave him: she was faint, ye sirs,
 And wasted sore with fastings; so our king
 Did give her food and placed her at the court;
 Where soon her story all was learned, friends,
 thus:

Her sire's castle had the Danes destroyed,
 Him slain, her mother, and the vassals—all
 Save the child's nurse, who did escape with her,
 And in the gruesome forest many days
 And fearsome nights abode,—scanting herself
 To give the wee one sustenance, until
 Frail Nature overcame the noble dame;
 And in this plight the king did rescue them.
 This is the history of the Lady Guilda,
 The comeliest maid and wittiest in the land,
 And cousin to the Lady Gweneline,
 The proud betrothed of this mansion's lord.

Beowulf. A shrewish and a proud wench, sirs, God
 wot,—

Her sire, though, poor-spirited and weak,
 Who talks large of great deeds—but never does
 'em.

Cynewulf. Enow, enow of maids; weeds be they all
To check man's mighty spirit's upward
growth;—

Though I thought otherwise in early youth,
As ye will know, ye sirs, so ye but list.

I loved a wench, a comely one, know you,—

Bold eyne, fair form, and saucy ways withal.—

'Fore Heaven, sirs, half my time was spent
for her:

Hours three, in fashioning my robes, my locks;
Hours five, in courting, nights in musing on her.
And then, friends, how she wantoned with me!

first,

My beard to please her must be fashioned—so;

My jerkin, 'twas not of the tint that liked her—

Forsooth, another jerkin! Market-days

I lingered round the stalls for pretty gewgaws,

Which with most hungry eyne she snatched.

O, sirs,

The pity of it! O, all manful feats

Unheeded for a fickle, saucy wench!

O, I, I the great one in war, a hound

Licking her hand and fawning on her—Pish!

She drained me of my manhood and my lands,

Then cast me off! 'Fore Heaven! O, weeds, weeds,
weeds.

Ye all know me, sirs, for a merry wight,

Peerless in combat, wondrous at his cups,

Take this from me: Respect maids, never love
'em;

It is a pitfall much to be avoided,—

This Ceawlin, I knew his sire well,

A man of valour, ay, a man to love.

His son be well enow, untried in arms

Though, and too eager to spout sentiment;

But our great king doth love him, so he's made.—
 Ah, Rollo, sighest thou? Tush, lad, Tush, lad;
 Thou soon wilt find thy damsel but a weed.

Rollo. Alas, great sir, that thou shouldst name them
 weeds;

Ah, no, but violets which enrich the air
 With sweetness, and delight the sight with beauty.

Alwin. Say, rather, roses—they have thorns.

(*Enter Ceawlin.*)

Ceawlin. Thorns! sir,
 Thorns! have at you! Good Even, gentles all;
 This jovial feast in progress joys me much;
 For I've not kept, I fear, our trysting-hour,
 For which your pardon.

Cynewulf. Faith, the byword runs,
 "Love feasts on air," but I who know no love,
 Thought 'twas a shame to spy such toothsome
 meats

Uncourted, so fell to with readiness—
 How stands the wooing, lad?

Ceawlin. It runs, O Cynewulf:
 The morrow's morrow is our nuptial day.

(*Enter an attendant.*)

Attendant. My lords, my lords, Ulla has just come in,
 And states he spied large forces of the Danes
 Pass through the forest—

Ceawlin. Are our men alert?
 Defences seen to? watchers posted?

Attendant. Ay, sir.

Ceawlin. Then for the rest, O friends, away with
 Care,
 Foul monster, feeding on our health and smiles.—
 Gaze on the heavens, one moment purest blue,

The next all flecked with threatening gloom;
such, sirs,

Is Fortune—then enjoy her while ye may.

Cynewulf. Ay, lad, er—er—'tis wisdom—er—'tis
wisdom.

The thought of combat—er—doth spice my
mead.—

Fill up—up—up the bumper to the lad

And his fair wedded dame.

Alwin to Withurn. Marry, O friend,

Our vaunter's thoughts are somewhat steered
awry.

List, Ceawlin has netted a rich fish:

His love is, through her mother, of king's blood.

Withurn. Ay, ay; but look thou, there be many fish

Of uncouth parts drawn from the deep, O friend.

Alwin. 'Tis true.

Cynewulf. Haste now, haste to the combat, all:

This night, through me, full many Danes shall
fall.

Ceawlin (aside). Haste to him, some of you, else he
may fall;

Pray, see he passes not the castle's portal—

And none of you will bide the night?

Alwin. Nay, nay,

We must be to our homes.

Ceawlin. Then, farewell, sirs,

Until the day you wot of, fare-ye-well.

All. Farewell, Old mother Fortune smile on thee.

(*Exeunt all but Rollo.*)

Rollo. May large delight be ever thine, my lord—

Would that I were as fortunate as thou!

Ceawlin. Thou wilt be, Rollo, so thou wait'st, adieu.

(*Exit Rollo.*)

Ah, what a wondrous comfort is a friend.
 For him we ope the casket of the soul,
 Whiles the great world sees but the garniture,
 The outward-seeming, cov'ring That within,
 Which, good or evil, it can never know;
 And never knowing, yet doth judge.
 Another thought: when friend is met of friend,
 How sweet the mutual look; the eye' embrace
 As in their probed profundity each reads
 The other thus: this is my spirit's twin.—
 Pause here: how passing rare true friendship is;
 How often friends are but base parasites:
 They gripe the goodly ship with gnawing clasp
 For intent provident; but when her hour
 Bodes near, as scullion rats, they slink their tails
 And haste to kindlier fields—how now? how now?

(*Re-enter Attendant.*)

Attendant. A messenger for your lordship.

Ceawlin. Bid him in.

(*Enter Messenger.*)

Messenger. My lord, some word fr'm the Lady
 Gweneline—

Ceawlin. Quick, quick, I pray thee, give it me—By
 Heaven! (*reading*)

Can it be possible? O spite, O spite,
 O cursed spite!—out, out, my venging sword,
 I'll to them single-handed—demons! stay!
 Who art thou, man?

Messenger. A servant, please thee, sir,
 Of Wyttekin, th' Ealdorman, and hied me here
 From my loved mistress with my promptest pace.

Ceawlin. O, I must get me to her!—

Messenger. Good my lord,
That would be running into Death's embrace;
And to my lady what would then result?
Life without colour, misery—and death.
My lord, in hasting hither with this note,
I held my life, as't were, a little thing;
For danger did abound on every side,
That scarce I hoped to see thy face at all;
And for a meed, my lord, I only pray
To see thy mind changed to a prudent course.

Ceawlin. Thy hand, O friend, my dearest thanks, and
this.—(*money*)

There is none other charge thou hast from her?

Messenger. None other, sir;
In sooth, she had but time to pen this note.

Ceawlin. Can naught be done, think'st thou?

Messenger. I think, so, sir;
I humbly counsel you to bide your while.

Ceawlin. Well, friend, oncé more my thanks for all
thy care.—

Thy mistress doth commend thee for my service—
Haste thee, refresh thyself.

Messenger. I will, my lord.

(*Exit.*)

Ceawlin. My love, my love, I'll scan thy note once
more.

(*Reads.*)

Dear heart, this to acquaint thee with distressful
tidings: the Danes, my lord, the Danes
have, through some treason, surprised and
captured our castle. My sire, kinswomen,
and myself are prisoners; bound at sunrise

for the Danish tents. More can I not write: my tears I must dry, that our foes may be given to see how a high-born Saxon damsel comports herself. All efforts must be fruitless that aims at rescue now—I adjure thee, wait. The bearer is commended for thy service.

Whiles these curst vultures seize their hapless prey,

I gaze on powerless—O, torturing thought!

What time of night?—(*looks out*—the Dawn is very near:

I will away and get me to the king.

(*Exit.*)

SCENE IV.—*Room of State in the King's Vill.: King Alfred and Queen Elswitha. A messenger enters with despatches for the King.*

King Alfred (reading). The vulture cloud o' adversity o'er us lours

With ever darkling wing—

Queen Elswitha. O dear my lord,

Let not these evil haps perturb thy mind

O'ermuch: the blackest cloud that ever frowned
Has often turned to blessings; and, loved sir,

Full many an anxious council has this mind

Of late held for the safety of thy health,

So sorely seems it changed in these sad times.

Be tender with it, sir, for all our sakes.

I pray thee, give the order for our gleemen:

Soft music may, perchance, beguile thy thoughts

To lighter channels.

King Alfred. Ah, beloved Queen,
 In those dears eyes of thine oft have I seen
 The trembling pearl-drop of sweet sympathy,
 For e'en the slightest of our wee one's hurts;
 Yet, though I stand as father to this state,
 And she is now, I fear, e'en in her death throes,
 Thou wouldst not have me grieve o'ermuch for
 her:

My fairest lady, where is now thy case?
 But music shall be called, at thy behest—
 What ho, within!

(Enter attendant.)

The gleemen here, pray thee

(Enter gleemen with courtiers.)

Tune, sirs, we beg thee, tune the kindling harp
 To soft melodious lays,—those lays, O sirs,
 That charm away Care and her baneful brood.

(Music.)

Queen Elswitha. And, Wethway, wouldst thou sing
 us thy bright song?

(Wethway sings):

Grey clouds gloomed o'er the Heaven's brow,
 And all was dark and drear:—
 The sun hath peeped from prison now,
 And once again I hear,
 From where I listen tranced below,
 Each little bird's blithe lay;
 From mowen fields sweet breezes blow,
 And all the world is gay.—
 Come out, my love, and hear my tale;
 Be thou estranged no longer;
 Come out, and let my vows prevail
 And link us ever stronger.

Queen Elswitha. Ah, me, 'tis wondrous sweet!

King Alfred. Ay, that it is;—

Our loving thanks, that chaunt ye finger well,
And to thee, Wethway, hearty commendations.
Ah, what a glorious wizard thou art ever,
Thrice lovely Harmony: thy magic wand
Thou wav'st—depart the tyrants Grief and
Gloom.

(*Half to himself*). And yet whenas red Morning
tips the east

Is it not true that Music's strains commence?
From every heart not carked with restless ill,
A new-fledged Hope has ris'n on joyous wing...
But restless ill too oft is with us—O,
That the ineffable utterances of Nature,
Expressed and indicated,—streams and brooks,
The Ocean, and the pregnant solitudes,
Green forests, birds,—should wait one moment
hushed,

As't were, in awe and reverence, as the steeds
Of Dawn approach, then stir in joy and sing;
That the effulgent glory of the sun
At his awakening rites;—should not exalt us;
That we should league us still with Sorrow, wrap
Us round in Self: 'tis monstrous, it is gross.
Or that the blessings which high God showers
on us

From morn till eve which is the crown of Day,
Benignant Night! whose voices whisper Peace,
That points to man's eternity—I say,
If all the music and the glory round us
Have no place in our hearts, we sure are swine,
To whom high God doth cast his pearls of love—

(*Enter Ceawlin.*)

Ah, Ceawlin! it is a joyance, sir,
To see thee at the court again—But stay!

I apprehend thou bring'st misliking news?

Ceawlin. O, Sire the King, my lady, I come here
To give you blackest tidings, which consort
Best with the covering night. The thought of
them,

Sir, chafes my wrath as with a prickly goad.

King Alfred. Good gentles, pray you, we would be
alone.

(Exeunt company.)

And now, Sir Ceawlin, these sad events?

Ceawlin. My liege, I had not left my Gweneline,
In sweet advance-thoughts of our nuptial day,
But hours three, when in a foaming haste,
A messenger arrived to state the Danes
In numbers formidable had, through some
treason,

Surprised the castle of the Ealdorman,
And taken prisoner Lord Wyttekin,
My poor betrothed, and her cousin, Guilda;
And to the loathed Danish tents they all
Must soon appear.

King Alfred. Thou surely say'st not so?

Ceawlin. Alas! it is too true.

King Alfred. Words are but vain—

O, had I but two thousand trusty swords,
These Northern would not hold their triumph
long.—

O me! What news, what news.

Queen Elswitha. Ah, gentle sir,
My heart, believe me, grieves at this thy news
Most heavily; but tell me, dearest friend,

The three of them will they be treated ill,
Is such thy thought? I trust it will not be!
I would that I were there to solace them.

Ceawlin. Ill treated? Gracious lady, I know not
But that e'en now they may be suffering
Indignities far worse than death to them.
O grant me leave, I cannot tarry longer:
I'll rescue them or die in the attempt.

King Alfred. And be more cruel to thy love, my lord,
Than are the Danes: is all thy judgment fled?
But listen, O my friend, each hour that fleets,
Brings on its wings some galling tidings curst
Of a fresh outrage from a Danish hand.
Such craven so our subjects fear-full hearts,
That they no longer for their liberties
Dare strive: they leave our throne to totter
down—

And yet, should God spare Alfred's life, we hope
Those words we spake will never be fulfilled;
So, sir, we would acquaint thee with our plans.
Our mind is cognisant of a biding place,
So fortified in Nature's handiwork,
That there, against the inroads of our foes,
We may be well secure. This scheme, my lord,
Has long time lain abrooding in my thoughts,
And now 'tis large for action: I have made
All proper queries touching this and that;
And now I am assured that in this place
We may give pecks and not be pecked in turn.
Thither, with all our dear and trusty friends,
'Mongst whom counts Ceawlin, we shall proceed
And in a busy preparation bide
Until such opportunity affords
A riddance of our scourge—now, sayest thou?

Ceawlin. As thou, my liege, has thus consulted me,
I feel o'erjoyed that England's Royal Hope
Will be thus safe; and much it pleases me,
This well contrived scheme of thine. 'Tis best,
Methinks, the best, for England and her throne:
But O, I do beseech thee, Sire the King,
To bid me not to join thy ranks: I am
Harassed so with this brooding, racking pain,
That in a quiet retreat I could not linger.
I must be up and doing, else I'd lose
My senses.

King Alfred. Come, it is our sovereign wish,
Which an thou disobey'st—what saith the Queen?
We'll have to chain the traitor; come, my lord:
Thou'll bless us afterwhile for this our care.

Ceawlin. My dreaded sovereign's will I must obey.

King Alfred. Believe me, Ceawlin, I feel assured,
So we but wait in patience busily,
That we shall very soon over the Danes
Obtain a full and perfect mastery;
Now let us cheer us with this blessed hope
And haste on preparations to that end:
My Queen, and thou my lord, pray, follow us.

(*Exeunt.*)

ACT II.

SCENE I.—*Danish encampment, a room in a cottage near by: Gweneline and Guilda.*

Guilda. Nay, cheer thee, sweet my coz :
The gloom must go, the sun will shine ; cheer thee.

Gweneline. Ah me ! my soul is heavy e'en to death,
Weighed down with dire forebodings that my
love

I never shall see more.

Guilda. Ah, speak not thus.

Our sorrows, Gwen, we are too apt to paint
In one tint only.

Gweneline. True ; but cousin mine,
As night by night I to my couch repair,
That if it might be, I may win that sprite
Repose for day-enfeebled limbs—alas,
I win it ne'er ! for then a warfare 'gins
Within me ; legions of unpitying doubts
Assail the portals of my mind with fierce,
Envenomed darts. I now petition Sleep,
Name her the peerless beauty, the beloved,
And every sweet, endearing epithet,
That haply she might stay her dewy car
And spray my laden eyes with kindly balm—
She will not list ! Thus drag the raven hours ;
Soul-awing note upon note thrills through the
vaults

Abysmal of the Night, until, O coz.,
The dreadful heaviness affrights my soul ;

Mine eyes grow weary straining for the Dawn;—
And then it pales—and there's the thrust! for
Day

Brings added woe; I see no glory in't,
But only poignant memories of what's been,
And never will be more.

Guilda. Alas! Alas!

How may I assay to answer thee?—list, though,
I feel a voice premonitory in this breast,
Which tells me that a gladsome termination
Will be the issue of our cramped constraints;
That thou wilt with thy Ceawlin enjoy
A life-long happiness; and, Gweneline,
Bethink thee of the need to cheer thy heart
For thy lord's sake.

Gweneline. That had escaped me wholly,
And thou mak'st me confess my lack of care
For him—Ah, thou hast hit me there, O coz;
My thanks; for thou hast given me this joy:
To make it my endeavour so to do.—
Thou art a mine of golden wisdom, coz!

Guilda. O, fie! Gold is the root of all earth's evil.

Gweneline. A pearl of greatest price I call thee, then.

Guilda. Which often cuts men's throats.

Gweneline. Hoots me! the Goddess of Wisdom shall
I say?

Guilda. O, cousin, an imperious coquette.

Gweneline. Pray, then, what may I name thee?

Guilda. Why, a maid.

(*Enter Osric.*)

Gweneline. The ever zealous lackey of our woe!

Osric. My due respects unto you, ladies twain.

Gweneline. Sir, in my childhood days, I learned,
respect

Should be defined thus—regard; but I
Was then that frothy bubble, a school girl,
And paid small heed unto the lesson; yet,
It seems that now I must unlearn the same.

Osric. (*Aside*) By Lucifer!

They must take wary steps that talk to maids!
(*Aloud*) In what have I offended, lady fair?

Gweneline. Regard, I take it, sir, does not intrude
A presence, when unwelcome, into the company
Of two defenceless maidens.

Osric. But, lady,

Canst not espy I love thee wildly, say?

Gweneline. Love does not make its objects miserable.

Osric. O, I repent me much; but, lady, know,
The months wherein thou wast to give my suit
An answer, have gone by long time.

Gweneline. Then, sir,

Thy answer take: thou hast insulted us,
So deeply that thy suit must be deferred
For thrice-count months. An this thou wilt not
grant,

To all thy pleadings I will seal mine ears.

Osric. O, lady, 'tis an hard entreaty, yea,
It is; and yet, to shew my penitence,
It shall be so.

Gweneline. Then, sir, I do relent.

(*Aside*) That I should have to palter to this
knave!

I feel aweary, so shall seek my couch,—
And thou, O cousin, eke?

Gilda. Yea, *Gweneline.*

(*Aside*) Why, cousin, wouldst thou have the jarl woo me?

Gweneline. I really wish he would, coz.

Gilda. Many thanks.

Gweneline. Give thee Good Even, sir.

Osric. Ladies, Good Even.

(*Exeunt Gweneline and Gilda.*)

Osric. Ah, ha! proud beauty, thou may'st e'en defer Thy fate, but come it shall at last, I swear; I hold thee in the hollow of my hand: Think not, my pretty bird, thou canst escape.— But, *Osric*, come, wear thou a perky air, That is the surest road to win a wench: Away thou courteous and thou nice aspect; Be bold, man, 'tis the readiest dart to pierce A damsel's giddy heart. I'll give it trial.

(*Exit.*)

SCENE II.—*Athelney, a neatherd's cottage: discovers King Alfred attending to cakes on the hearth.*

King Alfred. That I, the king of this despairing realm,

Should sit, perforce inactive, in this plight,

Is sure the very twisted spite of Fate.—

O God, but for two thousand trusty swords

To drive these restless vampires from the land.

How long, O God, how long, wilt thou chastise us?

Is't for my sin? my country's? Hear, O Lord!

Thy land sucks blood, thy people scattered wide,

The hearth dismantled, they the hapless prey

Of lust impious; captain thou our cause....

Nay, nay, how black soever our night is,
There still are generous hearts, and while they
beat,

All is not lost, we still will strive and hope—

(*Enter Herkha.*)

Well, Well, Alack-a-day, these cakes, these cakes!

Herkha. World on end, my cakes, my cakes, thou
worthless knave! Out upon the lazy loon!
Ho! doth it think its belly was made for
other folk to fill? and stretches out no hand
to help? Out upon it, fie!

King Alfred. Good mother, peace! I—

Herkha. Peace, thou piece of baggage!

Give me one piece of my poor cakes unburned,
And then cry Peace!

King Alfred. Alas, O worthy wife,

Thou see'st me truly penitent; but O!

My thoughts are heavy, charged with sad
constraint.

Herkha. My! hear the glib-tongued braggart! sad,
quotha? its belly, I trow, would feel sad, so
it had only those white hands to fill't.

King Alfred. But, dame, I sure am doubly penitent;

For never have I tasted cakes the like

Of thine afore, no, by my faith I swear't;

And now my mouth must water quite in vain

For those sweet things.

Herkha. Ah, say'st thou so?

And well thou may'st, for not a housewife, pretty
sir, in our broad England can make the equal
of 'em.—But, man, why shouldst thou be
sad? Methinks a comely form as thine was
not fashioned for sadness, come. Hoots the

day! an a silly wench's eyne 're not in't. Tush, man, take it from one who knows 'em—a fickle brood, sirs, fickle, fickle, and no two moments of a like mind: leave 'em alone; put on an indifferent front, a good weapon, mark'ee, and take my word for't they'll come round, and soon, I wot, and fly into thine arms; take my word for't man.

King Alfred. Fie, dame, thou whilom wert a wench thyself!

But no, my thoughts were for our Fatherland,
Now in the ruthless gripe of wolfish fangs,
Whiles here I sit, perforce, safeguarding cakes,
When I would fain be shedding wolfish blood.

Herkha. O, our dear country's wounds! they had
my thoughts

Escaped awhile; yet they are ever fresh
To my—

(*Enter Denewulf.*)

Denewulf. My liege, there waits without a youth
To see your grace.

King Alfred. Good Denewulf, bid him in.

Herkha. The king! I see, I see, how blind afore!

O good my gracious liege, do thou forgive,
A crabbed old woman's biting tongue, which
gives

No answer for her heart.

King Alfred. Forgive, good wife!

Methinks that word is due to thee for these
Same blackened cakes.

Herkha. O, prithee, name it not,

An't please your grace; they shall be treasured
up

As my most precious goods to mind me of
Our gracious Sovereign's honouring our poor hut.

King Alfred. That I may shew my penitence' utmost
self,

I pray thee, raise successors to these cakes,
And give me office as their champion
Against the fiery dragon—if thou then spy'st
One streak of burn, nay but a speck, sure, wife,
My name will not be Alfred.

Herkha. Ah—Ah—Ah—

May't please my lord the king to grant me leave
of speech;—methinks my liege wots how to rule
His subjects better than to tend their cakes.

King Alfred. Ha! ha! ha! ha! 'Tis true, good wife,
'tis true—

Ah Ceawlin, thou here?

(*Enter Ceawlin.*)

Ceawlin. I've sought your Grace
In every nook; the Queen is much perturbed
Anent thee, good my liege.

King Alfred. Then, Ceawlin,
We must straight set her anxious mind at peace:
Good Denewulf, thou wilt quiet this unrest?

Denewulf. My liege, I hasten to obey thy will.

(*Exeunt Denewulf and Herkha.*)

King Alfred. Friend mine, our thoughts are charged
with wild intent;

It is our mind to go in harper's guise
Unto the enemy's camp; there to eye out
Their weakness, puissance, and their intendments:
And, O my friend, so Fortune favours us,
Please God, we shall give battle to our foes,
And thus cast off our fetters curst.

Ceawlin. Dread sir,

Should I presume to offer opposition
To thy intents? O yes, for England's good
Doth argue my excuse—bethink thee, sir,
The risk thy sacred person runs; may this
Be not so, for, nor I nor England would
Forgive me ever should an evil hap
Chance to your Majesty, whiles here, my liege,
This body is, to do its bounden duty.

King Alfred. I thank thee warmly, but, my loving
lord,

Although we hold that in the order of our loves
Our country should take the precedence, yet,
May it be never said that England's Alfred
Changed duty-stations with or friend or foe
To shield his person from a danger's frown.
But let it please thee that we go this risk
To share together, if a risk it prove;
For I have learned that e'en these ruthless Danes
Hold harper's persons sacred—Ah! alas!
Forgive my o'ercharged mind for lack of thought
For thee; for now it minds us in their tents
Thy love lies prisoned with such careful bonds,
That, as we stand, 'twould be of little boot
To attempt to loosen them;—nay, my good friend,
That shall not be, Alfred must go alone:
To place salt on a wound is rightly held
A sorry act; and, further, Prudence and
The serpent's cunning must the weapons be
For this our enterprise, and we much doubt
An bleeding love is friend to these.

Ceawlin. O sir,

Although I feel my heart-strings snapping one
By one, although from every artery

The life-blood feel I ooze away, I will,
God helping, nurse my wounds for England's
sake,

Without a murmur in my bosom, till,
Spartan-like, I die: my liege, I'd come;
For, sir, no danger's apprehension
Can be the jailor to abiding love:

The taper burns the night-moth's quivering
wings,

Yet doth it love—yea, even to its doom.

King Alfred. Sith thou are purposed so, my lord,
We shall not stay thee, and I thank thee, sir;
Thy words are sound and liking to the ear.
Now let us to our womenfolk, that we
May calm their fears in person—come, my lord.

SCENE III.—*The Danish host, a room in a cottage—
Gweneline, Guilda, and Osric.*)

Osric. Lady, and thou wilt see our Prince?

Gweneline. I will,
And gladly, too.

Osric. Then hark'ee, pretty bird,
Thou must not even whisper to the Prince
That ye are in enforced captivity:—
Else will thy sire suffer dear for it.

Gweneline. Thou dost insult us; leave us, sir.

Osric. I go,
But, maid, Remember!

(*Exit.*)

Gweneline. Cousin, why! this jarl
In roughness waxes greater every day!
Oft have I mused to have the Prince acquaint

With his jarl's deeds; now am I minded fully
To do the same.

Gilda. Not so, O Gweneline,

Not so, I beg: the jarl is powerful;
We must act circumspectly—should we rub
His anger, he will, man-like, make that deed
The veil of past, the thief of further thefts.—
Bethink thee that ere now our king's made known
With this our plight, and speedily, be sure,
Will force an answer for these happenings.

Gweneline. That I might think so! but I cannot, coz.,
The eager will of our beloved king
Is shackled by his grosser means—but, soft!
Here comes the Prince.

(*Enter Guthrum and Osric.*)

Guthrum. Fair ladies, greetings to you both.

Gweneline. Great Prince,

Our reverent greetings and our humble thanks.

Guthrum. By Odin's Beard! this is a mighty
pleasance—

(*To Osric.*)

Why, sir, hast thou not made us known afore?

Gweneline. Great Dane, oft have we wished to see
thee—

Osric (frowning). Yet,

The lady's health has been but poor, thus would
The lady say.

Gweneline. Thou dost insult us, sir.

Osric (aside to Guthrum). King, she is in a shrewish
mood the night;

Take no note of her words, my lord.

Guthrum. Ah, sir,

Thou hast not made thy night's inspection,
I do believe?

Osric. O, please thee, that can wait.

Guthrum. It doth not please me—go!

(*Exit Osric.*)

(*To Gweneline*) Fair lady, say
Doth that wild man afflict thee much?

Gweneline. O sir,

I can bear up with it.

Guthrum. Fair lady, say,

Doth that wild man afflict thee much?

Gweneline. My lord,

An thou wilt have me speak, at times he doth.

Guthrum. (*Aside*) And yet he flaunts to all she is
his mistress!

Well, she's a beauty rare, ay, that she is—
Would she were mine! hum—nay, his influence
I fear too greatly—hum—'tis angering!

(*Aloud*) But thou dost love him?

Gweneline. Love him, Danish lord!

An hate is love, I love him mightily.

Guthrum. (*Aside*) Now, by my faith, that's good—
tis very good:

Thou'rt not his mistress, then?

Gweneline. His mistress, sir,

His mistress! liefer would I be such to
A serpent.

Guthrum. (*Aside*) Ha! It likes me well. Lady,
Pray thee, is there (thy beauteous friend
excepted),

One in this camp of ours whom thou dost love?

Gweneline. O yes, my lord, one whom I greatly love.

Guthrum. (*Aside*) By Odin's Beard, 'tis pleasing—
ay, 'tis so.

And may I seek to know—a he or she?

Gweneline. O may it please the Danish lord, a he.

Guthrum. Thy pardon, lady, but wears he a beard?

Gweneline. (Blushing) O yes, great lord.

Guthrum. And lady, is he young?

Gweneline. Sir, he is on the frontier-line of ripe
Old age.

Guthrum. Perchance, thou hast misjudged his years?

Gweneline. Oh no, my lord, the middle span of life
He passed long years ago.

Guthrum. (*Aside*) O women, women,
I ne'er can fathom you: why here's a damsel,
A lovely one, who to my face exalts
Some animated corpse, I will be bound—
Well—hum—methought I had a passing share
Of pleasing looks—hum—hum—'tis strange—in
sooth,

I like it not.

Gweneline. (*Aside*) O how he frowns! Great sir,
I trust I have not thee offended.

Guthrum. Hum!

I have been sore amiss, O ladies fair,
In giving you to know that far-famed scalds
Appear the morrow noontide at our court,
With siren music to bewitch our ears:
When we shall have your presence twain, I hope?

Gweneline. O generous Prince, thou hast our humble
thanks;

We surely shall be there.

Guthrum. Fair ladies, then,
I take my leave of you; yet this word further,
An our bad jarl makes show of naughtiness
More, prithee, let me be acquainted with't.

(*Exit.*)

Gweneline (*hastily to Guilda*). What think'st thou of him, coz.?

Guilda. O *Gweneline*,

Such merry moments hath he given me!

Didst heed the haviour of his ruddy face?

'Twas as the heaven's frolic on a day

Of Spring—sun chasing gloom, gloom chasing sun.—

Coz., tell me, is he boy or is he man,

Or both perchance?

Gweneline. He hath such sweet blue eyes.

Guilda. And, *Gweneline*, such wondrous guilelessness.

All things were such a simple wonder to him;

His eyes seemed thus to question: "Can it be?

Is't so? indeed!"—'Twas not for me, O coz!—

What think'st thou?—pit the kinglet 'gainst the jarl?

Gweneline. O, *Guilda*, what a wench thou art!—

'Twould not—

(*Enter Osric.*)

Osric. Now, tell me hast thou spake that I forbade thee?

Gweneline. Thou think'st the blue is preferable, my coz?

Osric. I wait.

Gweneline. When thou hast learned, sir, to address

A Saxon princess as befits her rank,

Though she may be thy captive, we will then

List to thy speech.

Osric (*aside*). By Thor! she's spirited!

Your highness, please it thee, thy servant sues

For thee to tell him if thou told the Prince

That which, in sooth, I really think, would be

Against thy interest to impart to him?

Gweneline. Well, sir, though we see through thy sauciness,

We do make answer, we did not.

Osríc. 'Tis well,

I am right pleased at thy discretion, ha!

Gweneline. I did not seek for thine encomiums, sir.

Osríc. But thou hast had 'em—Good Even, ladies.

(*Exit.*)

Gweneline. Well!

SCENE IV.—*The Danish encampment—a forest; Guthrum on a dais, Gweneline, Guilda, Osríc, Danish nobles, attendants, etc.*

Guthrum. I wax impatient for to hear these scalds;
Meseems, from your reports, sirs all, in harp-
craft

They're passing cunning.

Attendant. Dreaded lord, the scalds.

(*Enter King Alfred and Ceawlin disguised—they kneel.*)

King Alfred. Your highness' servants, humbly our respects.

Guthrum. Thrice welcome are ye to our court, wise sirs;

Our followers have praised your skill to us
So highly, that, like to the champing steed,
Our ears wax restive for their entertainment.

King Alfred. Most mighty Prince,
So we may justify those good reports,
Right happy shall we count ourselves the day.

BALLAD.

Tender notes, dulcet notes,
Tune my harp.
Canty notes, kindling notes,
Tune my harp.
Sighing notes, sobbing notes,
Tune my harp.
Thund'ring notes, throbbing notes,
Tune my harp.

Her tresses winnowed by the random wind;
Her waist round-girdled—rich with gold entwined;
Her emerald robes a figure fair do bind.

All in her Iceland home.

Her breast perfected by the drops from Heaven;
Her ripened cheeks rosed by the sun from Heaven;
Her sapphirine eye to shield her honour giv'n.

All in her Iceland home.

She sees! she sees! her true love's speeding feet;
They meet, the twain, each other tender greet;
They meet, the twain, with troth-plight pure and
sweet.

The murmuring of the mellow waters.

And eyes of love do answer eyes of love;
And hearts of love beat one with hearts of love;
And loving arms are locked in arms of love.

The murmuring of the mellow waters.

Ah! Wellaway! with its mighty pinions whirring,
The monstrous bird of woe is on them hurtling;
The air is aching, aching, with its shrieking.

The roaring of the raging waters.

The bird's dark plumage derked out all the light;
 The bird's dark plumage derked the day to night;
 Its cries the wightiest warrior would affright.

The roaring of the raging waters.

And sore's, and sore's the combat oft repeated;
 One wounded, aye anon the other wounded;—
 A respite, and he's to his love returnèd.

The soughing of the seething waters.

But once again the combat's clanging clamour—
 (Wan is her brow, her cheeks of woeful pallor)
 The bird, 'tis hurted by her hero's valour!

The soughing of the seething waters.

The weary warfare's o'er, the victory won!
 The warrior's horror-work is done, is done!

The lapping of the limpid waters.

And to his lover's arms he is restored:
 Put up the targe, put up the trusty sword,

Crown the victor!

And ocean, vale, and wold re-echo the word,

Crown the victor!

Never, O never will they be parted more.

The lapping of the limpid waters.

Prosperity sheds for them its smiling store.

The lapping of the limpid waters.

And theirs full valiant sons and daughters fair;
 And large increase theirs every, everywhere;
 The envy of their neighbours far and near.

Guthrum. An excellent well-told tale; the execution good,

The numbers smooth: great sirs, our hearty thanks—

The music, well, 'tis quite beyond our praise.—

A mighty charm there is in music, sirs.

I've known e'en animals to take to it.

King Alfred. E'en so, my lord,

And I have read that in times long sped by

There lived a wondrous skilful scald, whose home

Was in those far-off climes where Nature's lap

With richest gems is strewn profusely o'er.

There flowers exquisite grow; all luscious fruits:

The royal grape, plump with the generous juice,

Which e'en to spy, doth thirst the gods, there

lays

The mother root; hang down the golden face

Pomegranates; nor is there a lack of balms

To salve with spicy breath man's hurts and pain;

And in dark caverns' jaws of land and sea

Lurks wealth uncourted, wealth untold;—in few,

To make man merry and of cheerful brow,

Naught is withheld. This scald, puissant sir,

Had but to touch his pregnant lyre strings,

When swarming to him came creatures

innumerable

To hear the dulcet strains. From spiders of

The nimble legs to monstrous necked giraffes

Were there; and e'en the hideous serpent came,

With reverend gait;

His forked tongue now quite forgot to hiss,

Whilst lo!

The curious eye was charmed to mild intent.

The birds, meantime, with silenced wing gazed on
Wond'ring; that mortal wight should thus usurp
Their functions was in their mind marvellous
strange.

Guthrum. Ha! an astounding thing in very sooth:
What say ye, gentles, to't?

All. An astounding thing.

(Exit Guilda unobserved.)

Guthrum (to King Alfred). As earnest of our good
regard, accept,

Great scald, this jewel; wear it for our sake,
And we would tender this to thee, good sir.

(Presenting Ceawlin with gold.)

Ceawlin. *(Aside)* Necessity makes me keep down
my ire

And take't, else I would force it down his throat.

Osríc. *(Aside to Gweneline)*

Thou gazest most on yon high-stomached churl;
Of him thou dost have estimation higher,
Belike, than Osríc, jarl of Denmark? nay,
Thou shall have me, me, maiden, or—

Ceawlin. *(Overhearing).*

Villain!

Guthrum. By the thunder of Thor! what's this?

King Alfred. Puissant lord,

My servant has a mind most singular;
In early youth he had a fall from's horse,
Which addled so his brain that now that member
Is stocked with naught but phrases horsey,
Salted with this same ebullition, villain!

Ceawlin. Did a say the horse had nine hoofs?
Villain!

Guthrum. In sooth an addle-pated churl; say, sir,
What is thy name—so thou canst answer that?

Ceawlin. Crupper, an't please thee, villain!

Guthrum (to King Alfred). Good sir, he needs an heedful eye on him;

But, gentles, we must up and to the chase;

Sir, we will leave thee for a little space,

But trust that thou wilt witch our ears once more

At eventide.

King Alfred. Thy servant, mighty Prince.

(Exeunt all save King Alfred, Ceawlin, and Gweneline.)

King Alfred. O Gweneline!

Ceawlin. My dearest love!

Gweneline. Hush, hush,

Although my heart is breaking with its grief,

We must speak very low and bate our words:

These trees have ears, and that curst Dane ye saw

Doth hound my footsteps, with such fiendish care,

I dare not tarry long, he surely else

Will scent me out.

King Alfred. Then, hear me Gweneline,

So thou canst meet us here at Dawn's first peep,

There is a path I wot of hereabouts,

Which, negligently guarded, will, I think,

Us all lead safe away.

(Enter Osric unobserved.)

Osric. (Aside) It will—to hell!

Gweneline. My lord, it will be fraught with danger,
yet

Rely upon me to be here.

Osric. Ah, ha!

This is, I trow, the Saxon king, the youth
 Her lover, 'tis as patent as the sky
 Is pendant over us. But not for long,
 O youth, shalt thou that rosy title boast—
 Yet it would not be politic the king
 T' expose, for he my dealings with this maid
 Would bare to our dear Guthrum, who—ha! ha!
 Although no moralist, would readily
 This pliant pretext seize to banish me
 The Saxon kingdom and his princely face—
 To such envenomed hate the influence
 Which I hold with his men has led him to;—
 And this youth's person—Pish! is holden
 sacred—

That word! that word! When I have sent my
 Prince

Where he would fain not be, and I reign king,
 Sacred will be a pretty term—no more!
 I'll bide my friendlier while to pink the youth.

Gilda (on another side unobserved)

The king and Ceawlin! I am confirmed;
 And there's the Dane—O how he scowls on them
 Maliciously; ah, I will stay me here:
 I may, perchance, be able to do good.

Gweneline. But now, my liege, and sir my love, we
 part

Till Morning's face salutes us—(*aside*)—O, kind
 Heavens!

(*She sights Osric.*)

(*To King Alfred.*)

But the scald's name thou hast not told us yet?

Osríc. Ha! ha! she weens I know not that I know.

(*Coming forward.*)

Pray may I join this merry company?

Gweneline (*aside to Osríc*).
O take me to my hut—they are poor wits.

Osríc to King Alfred. 'Tis a great pleasance, sir, for us to list

To such wise scalds who come in garbs so mean.

King Alfred. Sure, 'tis a pleasance to be thus thought on.

Gweneline to Osríc. O let us haste.

King Alfred. The heavens are overcast;

Methinks, no sun the morrow we shall spy.

Gweneline. Ay, the celestial brow is threatening.

O!—farewell—farewell, sirs.

(*She departs hastily with Osríc.*)

Ceawlin. Th' accursed hound,—

Had he but tarried e'en one moment longer,

He would now be headless—

King Alfred. Whist, sir, whist!

Or else our plans are twisted all awry:

I have a fear that he, that Dane I mean,

O'erheard our plotting, so, our only chance

Is that we leave the camp this very eve;—

Although I have a sore presentiment

That *Gweneline* must longer here abide:

Thou seest, O friend, she understands it so.

But hear me further, this our trysting hour,—

Whenas each sottish Dane is sleeping off

The beast-like surfeit of his night's carouse—

The rest I speak anon; we must be gone;

This place for us is slippery—but list,

This in thy ear, my lord, we shall return,

I hope, in such a ticklish, sour array,
As will not suit their stomachs;
For, O my friend, these eyes have viewed what
 buoys

Me up to roseal hopes of victory.

Ceawlin. What joy indeed, my lord, may it be so.

(Exeunt King Alfred and Ceawlin; Guilda steps out.)

Guilda. Yea, in that fiercely glinting eye, I read
His harmful purpose toward our Ceawlin.
That must not be, and thou must stay it, O my
 heart—

But how? I have it though, I have it—joy!
When they escape I follow in their wake,—
In man's apparel—must it be so? yea:
I drown my woman's shame in such a cause;
And blessed chance! to thus array myself
I have the means: my foresight was not fruitless;
And in his service as a page I enter,
To shield him from the danger threatening him.—
But Gweneline, my tried and well-loved friend?
Some lines I'll pen to make her known of this;
Or never else could I outwit her care.
For a short while most miserable she'll be;
But better thus than miserable for aye—
Why art thou so rebellious, O my heart?
But I will do it though, let come what may.
O me, the bliss 'twould be to die for him.

(Exit.)

SCENE V.—*The same.**Enter Gweneline reading:—*

My cousin, I have overheard that which menaces the Lord Ceawlin; therefore, Gweneline, my instant purpose to seek him out and shield him from his pending danger. Have no fear for me, cousin, and this for thy further comfort,—the king, I learn, is about to prepare him for an onslaught; sanguine is he of success against our foes. May our God be with thee in thy loneliness. My kinswoman and my friend, my love is always thine.

THY GUILDA.

Destroy this for safety, prithee.

Gweneline. A rose amidst its prickles: I know not
Whether to be delighted or dismayed:
To think of all the dangers in her course
Affrights me, but her courage is sublime.—
O God protect her with Thine holy arm;
Turn from her all the perils in her path;
And to this bosom where she sits enshrined
Restore her safe.
Ah! she will be with my dear love; O me!
That I might have but one more glimpse of him.
(*She destroys the missive—exit.*)

SCENE VI.—*A forest, enter Guilda.*

Guilda. Thus far my questing footsteps, canopied
Beneath the friendly azure, for my path
This emerald carpet—'tis a beauteous spot,
And here a hermit I could wish to bide,
Aye nurtured 'neath the soothing eye of Nature:

To lightsome ope mine eyes as radiant Dawn
Steps out, and shakes her golden tresses wide
O'er sleeping earth, which hastily now rises;
And, as the cooing babe, wee dimpled arms
Raised to be fondled by the tender dame
To breast,—its bosom heaves; the giant hands
Feel upward for the Morning's genial kiss—
And list! the humming! 'tis enamoured of her.
These gleeful breezes dancing gaily by
Are bent on whispering to the trees their joy
At the uprisal; cheerily the birds,
In tuneful sweet endeavour, are clattering
To rival other in their lays of love.
And thus light-footed Day wends through her
 paces;
Each charm is lengthened out, until the Night
Enfolds you in her soft embrace. You gaze
Into her star-lit face, and read much lore;
Fresh joyance, breathing in all solemn musings;
The soul hath gotten raptured meditation.—
Transcendent privilege, to be a pulse
Of Nature's mighty heart! the modest need
Given by her largess;—you are far from fangs
Of envy, far from strife and wounded wrong.
Ah, fostering Mother of all blithesome health,
How manifold the joys thou giv'st! did we
But seek thy restful places oftener,
The scales encrusted on our spiritual sight
So long, by earthly frets and interests,
Would fall completely from us; thou wouldst
 steep
Our spirits in thy soothing founts until
The far-off veiled Home would closer come
Unto our thirsting eyne. O Nature, thou

Wouldst be to us a friend, a ceaseless friend,
Who would not, could not change through stress
of time

Or circumstance; and though 'tis very true
That earthly friends are dear,—and mine are
dear:

Sunk deep their roots of love are through this
heart;—

Yet those unquiet movements of the soul
They ne'er can satisfy, nor can we bare
Our inmost thirsts e'en to our bosom friends;
And from this token 'twould make me adduce
These strivings are divine: like as the dove
That I was reading of but yestereve,—

Finding no rest upon the troubled waters
Must needs repair back to the sheltering ark,—
Our spirits find their covering but in Heaven.—

Yet is it purely selfish thus to seek
A cool and bloodless strife, when round us lies
The ocean vast of starving, shipwrecked souls?
Ah, no, more seemly it would be, I think,
To put our mite of effort, though so puny,
Into that vexed and waste immensity,
Than for our own soul's gain to weakly labour:
The soul would, maybe, have its lustre dimmed
Somewhat—what matter for to God it shines
More brilliant—O!

(Enter a Company of Danes.)

Captain. Heigh ho! what have we here?

A prize, my masters, by the gods, a prize—

A Saxon youth—a goodly one to boot:

Secure him, ye men, and hasten on.

Guilda. What would ye have of me?—forbear, kind sirs,

For I am on a deed of charity;
Pray, do not hinder me.

Captain. Away with him!

We cannot stay to listen to a youth,
Yet even downless, prattling—hence with him.

(They lay hands on him—enter Oswald with a party of Saxons.)

Guilda. Help, loving countrymen, beseech ye, help!

I am on embassy to Ceawlin,
The Ealdorman; permit them not to take me.

Oswald. Youth, have no fear they shall not.

Captain. Ha! ye hear,

Ye Danes, this Saxon boast—to arms! to arms!
And mow the caitiffs down; then, we shall see
Who has the youth.

Oswald. Come on, ye Danish crows,
Although ye be in numbers twain to one,
We'll end your croaking very soon.

(Skirmish; the Danes are put to flight.)

(Exclamations of joy from Saxons.)

Oswald. Ha, ha!

Thus flees the raven at the hawk's approach.

Guilda. O, sir, how may I thank thee, how reward thee?

Oswald. 'Twas but my duty;—tell me, though, good youth,

What is thy name?

Guilda. Come near—come closer, prithee:

I know thee, thou art Oswald, serving-man
Unto the Ealdorman Lord Wyttekin:

This in thy ear, O friend, my name—is—is—
The Lady Guilda.

Oswald. O! the Lady Guilda!

Right well, my lady, am I joyed to see thee;
But, give me pardon, why art thou alone
In such a parlous wood, and, by thy leave,
In this disguise?

Guilda. Good Oswald, wouldst thou know me?

Oswald. Not in that garb.

Guilda. That greatly comforts me.

I wis that I can trust thee, listen now;—
I am on errand to Lord Ceawlin,
As I made known to thee afore, O friend;
And I am habited in this disguise
For motives of good acceptation
To thy poor mistress, Oswald—Ah, I know
The query thou wouldst put, and thank thee
for't:

Her health, alas, is but indifferent good;—
But tell me, Oswald, where's the Ealdorman?
What is this place?

Oswald. My lady, at sundown,

We shall be safe at Brixton, where our camp
Is arming for the warfare 'gainst the Danes;
Lord Ceawlin, he eke is at our tents.

Guilda. Good Oswald, is that so? what gladsome
news!

Oswald. Thou look'st, my lady, very weary, rest

Awhile, please thee, afore we journey on.
Thy leave, but thou in coming hitherwards,
Has ta'en a fearful risk.

Guilda. I know it well;

But, Oswald, let us speed on to our goal;

I need not, cannot, will not rest till that
Be reached: thou art accompanying me thou
say'st?

Oswald. Ay, to the camp I am returning me.

Gilda. Pray, let us not stop longer, then. I think
That thou hast many things to ask of me,
And we may converse on them as we go.
But, Oswald, give me first thy sacred word
Not to reveal aught I have spoke to thee;
Yet, further, this dear matter of my sex
Thou wilt not make known to the Ealdorman,
For which I am a suitor for thy kindness:
Have I thy promise?

Oswald. Lady, trust in me;
And give me leave to watch o'er and protect thee;
O lady, I beseech thee, take some rest
Afore we journey far: there is a hut
Which nigh to noontide we shall reach, where
folk

Abide well known to me—

Gilda. I promise anything
To haste us on; as for thy goodness, friend,
Thy mistress shall be well acquainted with't.

(*Exeunt.*)

ACT III.

SCENE I.—*Brixton, tent of King Alfred; enter Ceawlin.*)

Ceawlin. Right glad am I to see your grace.

King Alfred. Good E'en.—

My lord, I have good tidings for thee—thus:
Thou know'st that when we parted so abrupt,
After the merry jilting of the Danes,
To read the face of probability
Was my intent, as to the count of Saxons
We could rely upon anent the business
We have in eye: now know, my lord, we learn
From all our leaders that a goodly force
We can command, and further, sir, this force
Will rally here the morrow, when, please God,
We hope to give the Danes a right hot meal;
And thus I sent entreaty to thee, sir,
To haste here with all men you had in hand.

Ceawlin. My liege, the morrow!

King Alfred. E'en so, Lord Ceawlin.

Ceawlin. O may our cause be prosperous.

(Enter a messenger.)

Messenger (to Ceawlin). My lord,
There stands without a boy desiring speech
With thee.

King Alfred. Pray, bid him in; and now, my lord,
We leave thee for the nonce; for we have matters
Which claim our instant care around this camp.

(Exit—enter Guilda.)

Guilda. I pray thee, sir, Lord Ceawlin?

Ceawlin. The same,

What wouldst thou, my good youth, with me?

Guilda. My lord,

Knowing the common breath of good reports
Of thy fair valour and thy virtuous parts,
I, enticed thereto, come here to beg an office
Of service with your lordship.

Ceawlin. My service, youth!

Thou surely mean'st not that—my service? no!

Guilda. O, do not say me nay; I'll serve thee well
And trustily.

Ceawlin. But, youth, hast well considered,

That in these days and with such men as I,
The servants' office is not strewn with roses?
For thy frail form doth argue thou art scarce
Acquainted with the rigours of a camp;—
And yet thy face I like full well—thy name?

Guilda. My name is Elfrie, an it like my lord.

Ceawlin. And thou wouldst be?

Guilda. I come of goodly parents,

And, please it thee, I'd serve thee as thy page.

Ceawlin. Dost think thou couldst endure hardness,
youth?

Guilda. But give me trial, sir.

Ceawlin. Thou art more staunch, then,

Than are too many of our countrymen,
Who choose a bed of servile slavery,
In place of martial freedom; but thy hand:
Thou hast thy wish, and art forthwith my
page;—

I love thee much already—why, I wot not.

Guilda. For this may Heaven bless thee, dear my
lord.

Ceawlin. Well, we shall seek thy sleeping quarters,
come.

(*Exeunt, and re-enter King Alfred.*)

King Alfred. How weary are these bones—so weary
they,

I could, methinks, thrust off this wistful bark,
And in the waters of e'erlasting slumber
Be ever cradled, and be not refreshed:
Like to that prisoned animal, I beat
My anxious thought against the bars of Care;
Yearn to be free, yet each opposed effort
Is but the wounded joint of further pain:
To win or lose—my kingdom and my crown
The pawn—'tis harrowing. O Eternal One,
Shed down Thine arrows on our foes; confound
Their lustful councils; give the morrow, Lord,
A happy victory to this weeping land,
Humbly I pray Thee, God. I'll lay me down;
That wanton, Sleep, may be ensnared the night.

(*Sleeps.*)

VISION.

SWEET AND SOLEMN MUSIC.

FIRST APPEAR ANGELS.

First Angel sings:

From our bright Abode eternal,
From the sun-washed golden Shore,
Come we in our watch supernal
To our warrior suffering sore;
He is weary with the battling;
He's despondent in the strife:
We descending,
Come to cheer the warrior's life.

Refrain:

From our bright Abode eternal,
 From the sun-washed golden Shore,
 Come we in our watch supernal
 To our warrior suffering sore.

First Angel:

We of heirs of Heaven's salvation
 The Defenders and the Shield,
 Guarding them from shafts which Satan
 And the Powers of Darkness wield,
 Give this Prince our great protection
 On the morrow's battlefield:
 In commotion
 See, his foes before him yield!

Refrain:

We of heirs of Heaven's salvation
 The Defenders and the Shield,
 Give this Prince our great protection
 On the morrow's battlefield.

(*Angels vanish—after a space St. Cuthbert appears.*)

St. Cuthbert: Rest, warrior rest!
 Bright Star of England, wonder of this earth,
 Rest, for the night has woven her darkest veil
 For thee: sweet sleep's soft dew dispel thy
 dearth:
 Sleep on, brave one, thy goodly deeds assail
 Thy Maker's Throne with grateful incense;
 sleep,
 Great Heart; for He will give thy country rest

Ere pales another eve. A solace deep
 Thou'll quaff, and future peoples name thee
 Blest;

Sleep, warrior, sleep.

(St. Cuthbert vanishes.)

King Alfred. *(Waking)* Sweet voices of the night!
 What feasts of beauty have ye given me!
 How quivers with its ecstasy my heart!
 I feel as if I had eternal youth.

(Sleeps again.)

SCENE II.—*Brixton—King Alfred enters Ceawlin's tent and awakes him.*

Ceawlin. Good morrow, dear my liege, the time of
 day?

King Alfred. Hush, Ceawlin, hush, 'tis the holy
 time:

(Drawing back the folds of the tent's entrance.)

Gaze out, my lord, gaze out, behold! the Dawn!
 The royal slumberer's oped his golden eyes
 And stirred him from his eastern couch. The
 while

His flaming heralds usher in bright Morn,
 Departs soft Night, her dewy office o'er,
 For western coves with musing pace and slow:
 Eftsoons the monarch's burnished car's unhooked
 For fiery drives through tracks of liquid blue—
 But let us up and join the aery choirs
 That now their matins 'gin to Heaven's high
 Lord.

(They perform their devotions—and enter a messenger.)

Messenger. My liege, the army wait your sovereign presence.

King Alfred. Sir Messenger, prithee, we await them here.

(*Exit Messenger.*)

O, Ceawlin, I am in joyous mood;
 For as I lay me down to rest last eve,
 I had a pleasing dream, 'twas this: methought
 The great Archbishop Cuthbert came to me,
 And those bright visitants from heavenly shores,
 And gave me sweet assurance that our land
 Would win a happy victory the day.

Is that not cheering?

Ceawlin. Ay, my liege, it is.

(*Enter host.*)

KING ALFRED'S SPEECH TO HIS ARMY.

King Alfred. Ye valiant sons of Anglia, arise!
 Arise and throw your galling bondage off:
 'Tis I, your king, great Woden's son, entreats

(*Tumultuous cheering.*)

Long live the royal Alfred—long his days!
 Our gracious liege, once more restored to us.

King Alfred. Restored to you? Yes sirs; and I know well

That ye will shield his throne from tottering
 down,—

That throne bought with the blood of many a sire
 Of glorious renown: and sure their sons
 Will not bow down, like dogs, and lick the hands
 Of foreign masters, fawning on them the while?

All. No! No!

King Alfred. And, sirs, ye will not see the Danish fangs

Bleeding your goodly lands; their beast-like lust
 Enforced on your daughters and your wives;
 Your little ones in slavery's biting bonds?
 Up! Up! my friends; quit ye like men, be strong;
 With cheerful heart and brow assured, on, on
 To Ethandune, where lie the enemy's tents;
 And there, be sure we drive the Danish hounds
 Back to the Northern kennels whence they came:
 Resolve us all to quit the battlefield
 As conquerors, else enrich it with our bones.
 O, sirs, know ye, our heavenly Father's wings
 Are o'er us; he'll defend the right.

Army. On, On,

We'll follow him, if needs be, e'en to death.

(*Exeunt.*)

SCENE III.—*Before Ethandune: enter King Alfred and his army.*)

King Alfred. I take it kindly, comrades in this cause,

That ye have with this firm and fixed resolve,
 And cheerful complaisance, marched on with us:
 I take it kindly, sirs, I say. Behold!
 Yon is our goal: gird up your valiant loins;
 Make arms as steel and lusty hearts as flint:
 I would admonish you to think of naught
 But of a glorious victory this day.
 Now for the onslaught, friends; your watchword
 be—

For God, your king, and country—ho! the charge.

(Trumpets sounded—alarums, the attack made. Danes fleeing appear across the stage. Enter Osric and Widolt meeting.)

Osric. Dog of a Saxon, I have thee at last:
 Draw, man, so thou be not a craven, draw.
 Ha! wouldst thou wed the Lady Gweneline?
 My tears for thee are flowing grievously;
 For thou must go unwedded e'en to hell.
 Belike, some damsel there may claim thine eye.

Widolt. Thou currish Dane, what words are these
 thou speak'st?

I am no lover of this Gweneline:
 What meanest thou?

Osric. Art not called Ceawlin?

Widolt. Lord Ceawlin—that am I not, thou cur.

Osric. Dost thou deny, O chicken-livered churl,
 Thou art thy mother's son?

Widolt. Thou damned Dane,
 I am my mother's son, and proud on it;—
 But fight, vain vaunter, fight! go to! dost think
 Thou canst affront a Saxon so?—go to!
 No, by the Rood! Thy life shall pay for this.

Osric. Denials, Saxon, shall not shelter thee:
 On to't!

(They fight—Widolt falls.)

O, I am slain—my love, my love.

Osric. E'en with his parting breath he calls on her:
 It needs must be this cursed Ceawlin.
 Thus die all bars to Osric's hopes!—Strange,
 strange,
 That he his proper person should not own to,
 Whiles such denials could not guerdon him!

(Inspecting him.)

But it is he, I could take oath on it—
By Thor! the Saxons here! then I must flee.

(Exit—Offa enters with other Saxons running.)

Offa. My comrades, haste us, haste us to the fray:
Ours must not be a barren victory.

Saxon (indicating the dead body of Cynewulf).

Ho! the great vaunter, Cynewulf!—all his vaunts
Are over, though, in this world.

Another Saxon. Ah, poor vaunter!

Offa. Whist, Whist, respect the dead—God rest his
soul!—

(seeing the corse of Widolt)

Why! O, my God! and can it be! O woe!
Sirs, 'tis the body of Lord Ceawlin—
Quite dead!—that I have lived to see this sight!—
O, let's away with our sad burthen, friends.

(Exeunt bearing the corpse of Widolt.)

(Many Danes cross the stage followed by Saxons.)

First Saxon. How goes the day with us, think'st
thou?

Second Saxon. Why, comrade, fully merrily: 'tis
ours, or name me not a Saxon. We gave 'em
a tough surprise, and no mistake.

First Saxon. All owing to our good Prince.

Second Saxon. Marry, yes, thou hast it there, my
master. I'd give my life for him, and thou
wouldst, I'll be bold to say, and every
Saxon, eke.

First Saxon. Ay, man. But canst thou tell me,—no,
I'll lay a wager on't thou canst not, where
the king did conceal him those strange
months six?—Ha! I have thee at a scratch.

Second Saxon. Marry, then, the scratch will be against thee: list, I had it from my sire, who is uncouth quick at foxing out hidden concerns: his words—the king was travelling up and adown in monk's owl-cap and gown.

First Saxon. And wouldst thou give credence to't? Old gossip Hilda, and other folk have thrice him slain and three times raised him up again—How now! what is this hubbub! What ho! my masters, what's the matter, say?

(Enter Oswald and other Saxons with Sigurd prisoner.)

Oswald. Ye see this ill-featured toad? then, mark him well: he is an unholy traitor. What say you to this, ye Saxons? This toad, name him not man, bewrayed for gold his master's castle to a swine-born Dane.

First Saxon. Quotha? proof, proof.

Oswald. Have patience, do.

First Saxon. Say, the master's name?

Third Saxon. How now, numskull, go to, hold thy peace; let him to it as he will.

Oswald. This fellow, Sigurd is he called, on seeing that I, forsooth, would have none of the Dane's bribe, strook me to earth; and, masters, I was took for dead, and would have been so, had not a timely friend chanced by, and cared for my wounds. Now stand I here, in body sound, to charge this soulless fellow with these great crimes. First count, his master, the Ealdorman Wyttekin, who, with his mistress eke, ever dealt kindly

by him, he bewrayed. Next, that he joined the Danish force 'gainst our nation and his.

All. O!

Oswald. 'Tis true. Last, that he dealt a blow to a countryman whiles he had his back toward him:—ye Saxons should this fellow be suffered to live?

All. No, no.

First Saxon. But let us first hear an he has aught to say.

Sigurd. I will have naught to say to you.

Oswald. Then, friends, I have the surest claim to rid our land of this base wretch.

All. Thou hast, we witness to't.

Oswald. Then thou who are called Sigurd, hast aught to say afore I thee the quietus give?—no prayers, man, that they naughty deeds may be forgiven—think, say that thou dost repent.

Sigurd. I repent me that I did not crush the breath out of thy misbegot body; come to, I am prepared.

(They fight—Sigurd falls.)

O, thou hast done for me!

Oswald. So dies a traitor, sirs. Alack! it sorrows me to say't; for he was my sometime friend. Now to chase the fugitive Danes once more—away!

(Exeunt.)

SCENE IV.—*Another part of the field, enter Ceawlin (wounded) and Guilda.*

Guilda. Dost feel much hurt, my lord?

Ceawlin. Yea, lad, I do,—

The pain, the pain, 'tis cruel—O dear God!
(*faints*).

Guilda. Ah me! what shall I do? speak, sir, O speak.

(*Enter some Saxons.*)

My countrymen, I know that ye are kind:

This is Lord Ceawlin, sore wounded, sirs,

Give help and ye shall have a rich reward.

A Saxon. Lord Ceawlin, that goodly warrior!

Help, say'st thou? that will we with right
goodwill;

We'll carry him to shelter—ho! give help,

My comrades, give an helping hand will you?

(*Guilda offers to help.*)

Nay, nay, lad, do not so; thou look'st thyself

As if thou needest carrying, eke.

Guilda. My thanks,

My boundless thanks to you, O gentle sirs;

Ye shall be well repaid, I warrant you.

(*Exeunt.*)

Alarums, many more Saxons cross the scene.

(*Enter Offa and a Saxon meeting.*)

Offa. Where is the king, say'st thou?

Saxon. I know not, sir.

Offa. Well, I must haste me on to seek him out.

(*Enter King Alfred from an opposite direction,
meeting Guthrum.*)

King Alfred. Now, yield thee, Dane.

Guthrum. Saxon, the day is yours.

Natheless, I yield me only to my peer,
And that must be thy king—so have I vowed.

King Alfred. Thy vow is like to be fulfilled, O
Prince:

I am King Alfred.

Guthrum. Say'st thou so,—no, no?

King Alfred. There is none other royal Dane.

Guthrum. My hand,

Accept it, Prince: although thy prisoner,
I feel no shame, nay I am even proud,
To yield to one whom wide tongued fame speak'st
of

With such illustrious glory.

King Alfred. I, great Dane,

I, on my part, am right well pleased to meet
Such a gallant warrior as is King Guthrum.
But hear me further, sir, I fain would have us
As trusted brothers, not as cut throat foes,
With snarling fronts opposed and lusting teeth,
As angry mastiffs, matched to t'other's throat;
And to this genial, this desired end,
Would make this proposition: know, O Prince,
There is a portion of our state—whereof anon,
Which we are well prepared to allocate
For th' exercise of thy sovereignty;
The boundaries and questions pertinent
Thereto pertaining, will, by common voice
Of England's Witan, be determinèd;
That so, if Heaven approves of our intents,
This wasteful feud twixt Dane and Saxon, may
Be pregnant with a lasting peace to us.
Sir, prithee, I would have thy mind on this?

Guthrum. Most noble Alfred, I am filled with joy,
 With gratitude, at this thy generous offer: 'Tis
 Well mated with my honour, and, great king,
 I embrace it with all cordiality.

King Alfred. Our loving hands, as pledge of good
 intents.

(They clasp each other's hands.)

But pray thee, speed us as the winged wind
 To spread these gladsome tidings.

Guthrum. My good lord,
 I do beseech thee, tarry here awhile:
 I beg thy kingly ears to hear my tale.
 There is a matter, sir, which I would fain
 Unlock my wrestling heart to thee anent;
 I crave a patient hearing—have to it.
 Ofttimes of late with my unstable heart
 I've held grave communings; on this wise
 mused I:

The great all-chieftain whom the Saxons name
 Their Christ, and worship God of Gods, is He,
 I asked my soul, man's potent conqueror—
 For such his votaries boast him as? and thus
 It answered, look around thee and behold!
 Would men and women pleasures all resign;
 Tranquil employment of their wealth, to bear
 For him an heavy burthen, though self-sought,
 With a ready and withal a thankful grace;—
 And that I find from love and not from fear,
 Which wits me not a little? Would these wights
 To shield their faith from a denial, death
 Choose, calling blessings on their foes the while?
 And last (this thought is urgent), would great
 Alfred

Forgive a foe of treacherous parts—my lord,

I'm overcome—(*a pause*)— and treat him as a brother?

Could this be so, an their boast were not true?
Nay, that it could not be. To miser words,
My heart, O Saxon king, is netted eke,
And I would serve henceforth this mighty Chief,
And have his mystic water rite o'er me
Performed.

King Alfred. Those words of thine have given me
More joy, O Prince, than I can well express:

(*He drops a jewel.*)

They come like holy Eve to end our day
And bless it; let us speed on with our news—

(*Picking up the jewel.*)

Didst drop this jewel, sir?

Guthrum. A jewel? no—

Yet stay—By Odin's—Ah, 'tis very strange:
I vow I gave a jewel like to this
As hawk to hawk, unto a Saxon scald,
Who witched us greatly with his pleasant art
When in our camp; but I am much afeard
He was an arrant knave: he left our tents
Withouten e'en a grasp of hand.

King Alfred. Well, well,

He must be with our force: hast not espied him?

Guthrum. I've wished to fervently, but I have failed
As yet to see his face: I loved him much;
He was a royal entertainer.

King Alfred. Yea,

That he was royal, that is very true—
An entertainer, no, I think not, sir:
O Prince, I was that scald.

Guthrum. Thou—thou—By Od.—

And yet I see it is so, now; ha! ha!

Had I but known!—thou would'st not now be here!

I bear no grudge, albeit, sir; leave that
To puny minds. No warrior's worth his name,
Who, foiled in fight, bears malice 'gainst a brave
And chivalrous adversary.

King Alfred. (*Drily*) Spoken well;

And much I thank thee for the decent love
Of thy reception whilst thy unbid guest.

This jewel, courteous evidence of that,
Shall ever mind me of thy kindness.

Guthrum. What time, great sir, I tendered it to thee,
I little wist of its high destiny,—

That it should be of England's Alfred worn.

King Alfred. It shall be ever treasured lovingly;

But let us have more speech of this anon,

At our more leisured ease: depart us now

To make a solid from this mutual breath.

(*Exeunt.*)

ACT IV.

SCENE I.—*The same; an hut on the outskirts:
discovers Ceawlin laid up on couch with Guilda
tending him.*

Guilda. The radiant Bride of Morn is now far paced,
And soon must hide her blushes in the West—
So sinks my fainting heart.

O joy, thou cruel, O most partial maid;
Unsought, unthanked, thou fill'st this mortal's
cup

E'en to o'erflowing, whilst, O giglot one,
That wight may sigh, may groan, and e'en may
strew

Thy shrine with sacrificial tears, and thou
Continest obdurate! until, perchance
Wearied with importunity, thou com'st—

Ah! but, to give the weary sufferer
A wafer! to allay the parched void:
One taste and all is gone!

And yet, methinks, e'en the most favoured wights
Are but poor butterflies: how soon their day,
The brief day of their joyance wanes, and night
Succeeds—but everlasting? no, blest thought!

What blank despair, what rayless anguish else;
What boots it, then, to carry on this vast,
This heavy load of contradictions

Which we call life, our life?—ah, butterfly,
I said? yes, yes, apt emblem of my state:
Here do I sun me; cull the honeyed sweets

In the hour-courts of Delight, and after—Death,
 Nay, worse, a living one: too, butterfly-like,
 Here must I give the germs of others' bliss
 Afore that dread event—then, be it so!
 Hands do your healing office, do it well;
 Nurse back to health this much beloved form.—
 Ah, dearest, of my life the star supreme,
 Ah me, thus do I torture this vain heart:
 Couldst thou but know who hovers o'er thee now;
 Couldst thou but know how much I love thee,
 dear.—

Ah, why didst thou destroy my spirit's peace?
 Ere I saw thee my heart could well affect
 The noble Edwy when he sued so oft
 To have this hand.—But what is this, O heart?
 Him slay, that in th' uniting arms of Death
 We may be one!...unhallowed thoughts,
 avaunt!

Back get you to the Stygian cave from whence
 You came to fright my shrinking soul.—
 O blest Redeemer, pitying Son of God,
 To whose all-searching eye our inmost thoughts
 Are mirrored, clear as light, blot from thy
 scroll

This sin, humbly I pray my holy Lord.
 To some lone convent shall I get me; there,
 With founts of tears, continual prayers, and fasts,
 With chastisements, in vigils of the night,
 Make effort to wash out this fearsome stain,
 And bide the rest of my unlovely pilgrimage.

Ceawlin (*awaking*). Gweneline!

Guilda. What is it, O my lord?

Ceawlin. Methought, I saw her in some peril—up,
 I must away to her—

Guilda. Not so, my lord;

Thou may'st not do so; rest, I pray thee, rest.

Ceawlin. Nay, stay me not, O youth, I will, I say.

Guilda. Ah, hear me, Ceawlin, Lord Ceawlin,

Tis I, er—er—'tis Elfric who intreats;

Thou art not strong enow, my lord, and, know,

Thy Gweneline is safe.

Ceawlin. Who art thou, say?

Methought, I heard my true love's cousin speak.

Guilda. Thy Gweneline is truly safe, my lord;

I am thy nurse, obey thou must—rest thee.

Ceawlin. And she is safe; O, I am much relieved:

Didst say that she is safe?

Guilda. Quite safe, sweet sir.

Ceawlin. It must have been an awesome dream; how
hot

My brow!—Why, lad, thou art as womankind

For tenderness; tell, where didst learn to nurse?

Guilda. In nature's school, my lord.

Ceawlin. A shrewd reply!

Then nature had a pupil very apt,

And I am in her debt full sore—heigh ho!

These eyes would ne'er have seen the light again

But for thy watchful care.

Guilda. Sir, please it thee,

Make no more mention of it.

Ceawlin. By my faith,

No more! I'll do so to my latest day:

My gratefulness is beggared for the means

To show itself, and must, perforce, use words,

Poor words! for lack of goodlier weeds; but,

youth,

When I am settled on my feet once more,

Thy rich reward will be my first of cares.

But tell me, wilt thou be my page for aye?

Gilda. My lord, I must—I mean I cannot—O!
 I wis not what I mean; I—I shall leave
 Thee not, be sure, till thou art strong in health,
 When thou wilt know—but good my master, rest:
 Bethink thee, thou must hoard up all thy strength
 For thine own and thy mistress' sake.

Ceawlin. Well, yes,
 I am so weary, O so weary, youth.
 (*Sleeps.*)

Gilda. Farewell for ever, Hope, farewell to Joy:
 Henceforward all my life must be to me
 An endless plain of nothingness! no gleam
 Of sweet sensations from the travelled past,
 And for my future steps, no restful place,
 No vista of delight, no bourn but death.
 Come quickly, Death, for I am very weary.
 (*The scene closes.*)

SCENE II.—*Osric's cottage; Gweneline,—Enter Offa.*

Gweneline. Mine eyes must play me false, or is it
 Offa,
 My father spiritual, and well-loved friend?
 Thou bring'st as welcome breath of joy with thee
 As ever liberty was to a poor caged bird:
 My father, I have yearned for something Saxon
 For many fretful weeks.

Offa. My blessing, daughter;
 It is indeed I, Offa, and I learned
 Thy whereabouts from some great Danish lord
 Now, daughter, keep up heart, I must, alas,
 Prepare thee for most churlish tidings.

Gweneline. Speak,

I charge thee, speak, tell me the worst.

Offa. My God,

This office is too heavy for Thy priest.

I would, I would, that I could leave unspoke

What 'tis my duty to impart.

Gweneline. O sir,

Is the king dead? the battle lost? what, what,

Is it?—O do not leave me in suspense.

Offa. May God sustain thee, dearest *Gweneline*:

Thy lover's dead.

Gweneline. Thou dreamest—O thou dreamest,

Say thou but dreamest.

Offa. Daughter, I would give,

To say those longed-for words, my wealth, my
life,

My anything.

Gweneline. My ears refuse to take in thy sad words.

Offa. A lie, my daughter, never is the truth:

These most unhappy eyes did see thy lord

Clasped in the clammy arms of Death's embrace.

He died a martyr for our England's cause:

Muse thou on that and let it cheer thee.

Gweneline. Nay,

It cannot, cannot, O my father—Grief

And Sorrow, ye shall be my friends for aye.

I never wish to see Day's garish face

More: 'tis the visage of departed joy;

Come, Night, cast o'er me thine e'erlasting pall.—

(*She looks out.*)

Wild, wild, the day, yet wilder are the fires

Within me; kindred are ye to me, winds,

Now chafing and ye weeping seas; your lyre

Is stringed to grief; come we will pipe together.

And shall I never see thee more, my love?
 Ah, woe is me, the chambers of my soul
 Are blackened, blackened—woe is me!

Offa. Daughter,

What words are these? I pray thee, calm
 thyself.—

The grief of man is as a river dammed:
 Its potent power's reserved; the manly brow
 Scorns tears; but though I may not show Grief's
 front,

My heart, nathless, grieves for thy lover dead,
 My spiritual son. This frame would willingly
 Have died in place of our brave Ceawlin.

But, daughter, my most sacred office bids me say
 Thy grief is pagan-like: it is divorced
 From the blest hope of immortality.

Gweneline. My father, thou art in the right, I think:
 May God forgive the wild, untuneful words
 That have been wrung from this unsteady heart.

Offa. Amen, Amen. God has but took him Home.

Ah comfort, comfort thee, my Gweneline;
 He in His tender mercy grant thee strength
 To bear this weighty sorrow; now, farewell.
 Woe loves its own society the best,
 So I will leave thee for a season: Peace,
 And holy Church's blessing rest on thee.

Gweneline. Farewell my father. (*Exit Offa.*) O
 thou cruel Death,

Thy icy kiss sighed on his youthful lids,
 And yet spared me. I shall outwit thee, though,
 I'll seek my lover's corse and leave it ne'er:
 I come, my love, I come—another trial!

(*Enter Osric.*)

What wouldst thou, prithee, sir?

Osric. This, lady, this,
I come to have thine answer, yea or nay,
Anent the question I have put to thee,
And which I gave thee six months' space to
ponder.
My love no longer can be held in check:
Thine answer?

Gweneline. O have mercy, sir, beseech,
Have mercy, grant me but another day—
But till the sun has set.

Osric. Not e'en till then;
Not e'en another moment will I grant.

Gweneline. Behold, sir, on these knees which never
yet

Have bowed save to their God and to their king,
A princess makes request: hast thou no ruth?

Osric. Love, lady, has no ruth—as well expect
The scavenging dog to stay his hungry tooth
Upon the bone thou puttest in his grasp;
As well expect—thine answer, give it me.

Gweneline. Then hear it, hear it ruthless Dane: I
hate,

Defy thee, loathe thee in my every part;
I would as lief a viper take to mate
As wed with thee. Such is thine answer, take't,
Think on it ever; and this further, Dane,
Pray, leave me; shew me not thy face again,
Or solemnly I vow thou wedd'st a corse.—
O Dane, I read thee well—thou lovest me not.
Love speaks in gentle accents; knows no guile;
Is never haughty, cruel—jarl, too pure
A flame is love for such as thou to know.—
Thy hand, sir?—nay, not even with the fork
Our churls use for the tossing of our hay
Could I it touch—

Osric. By all Valhalla's Powers!
 This I will never brook—thou Saxon maid
 Me shalt thou have, or I will—

(Enter King Alfred disguised.)

King Alfred. Evil Dane!
 Hear, and be well advised, Down on thy knees
 And sue for grace and pardon from this lady—
Osric. Hell's Furies! Blasting Fires! Who art thou
 That speakest these high-stomached words to me,
 Me, me, a jarl of Denmark?

(King Alfred throws off his disguise.)

Gweneline. O, the King!
Osric. Then, be thou king or be thou devil,—fight!
 Full dearly shalt thou rue thy flaunty speech;
 I challenge thee to combat.

King Alfred. Know, O jarl,
 That Princes judge; it is their right divine;
 But to contend in arms against wrongdoers
 They may not—yet a crime as thine is great,
 No man may view it without chastisement
 On the offender:—strength 'gainst weakness?—
 shame!
 'Gainst women?—double shame!—Dane, this
 affront
 Demands an instant answer; on thy guard!

(They fight.)

Gweneline. O, sirs, put up your swords, I do beseech.
 Thy wish I will consent to, Danish jarl
 Fight not against the Majesty of England—
 I will consent.

King Alfred. Nay, Gwen, that shalt thou not;
 To't again, jarl—

(Enter Danish officer with soldiery.)

Officer. Osríc, Danish jarl,

I arrest thee on high treason.

Osríc. Ha! thy warrant?

Officer. I arrest thee for conspiring 'gainst the life
Of our dread monarch.

Osríc. Bah! I defy you all;—

But here's a princely bird, (*indicating King
Alfred*) O Officer,

That may enrich thy sleek, official pie,—

'Tis Alfred of the Saxons.

Officer. Hum—well—hum!

This, maybe, will procure thy pardon.

King Alfred. List,

I advertise you to forbear, ye Danes:

Should but one hair of Alfred's beard be harmed,

This horn would sound what would your death
knell prove:

Think not we come alone, six times your force

Attend without to do their sovereign's will.

Be wise in time.

Officer. Come, let us haste from here.

(*Exeunt officer and men, with Osríc prisoner.*)

Osríc. We must put off our merry fight, O king,

Until a less portentous moment.

Gweneline. My liege—

King Alfred. Ah, thou wouldst twit me for a rash-
ness, Gwen.—

Nay, twit me not; my wrath could not be curbed.

But I have many tidings for thine ear:

Learn first, O lady, that thy countrymen,

Do call for thy glad gratulations.

Gweneline. O, sir, the battle ours? Praise to high
Heaven!—

Thou hast no hurts, my lord?

King Alfred. None, Gweneline;—

Alas, I fear the count of those who have
Is grievous—bitter tears are flowing now....
But, cousin, do not take it ill of me
That I have failed to seek thee out ere this.
Much thought I gave't—but no the combat
claimed

Me wholly; on the score of that rude Dane
I felt uneaseful—but no more of that:
Great have thy griefs been, great thy joy will be.
Now, prithee, I will summon our stout men
And we will trace our steps unto the court;
Where grateful joys awaits us, Gweneline,
Which chastened, are more pure, benign.

Gweneline. O, sir,

Do not command my presence at the court;
I pray to be excused, my liege—

King Alfred. How's this?

I summoned Ceawlin to meet thee there?—

Gweneline. O, sir, thou knowest not the fearful
truth?—

My Ceawlin is dead.

King Alfred. Dead, sayest thou?

Dead, O harsh fate!—when wert acquaint with
this?

Gweneline. Offa, the priest, informed me of the
news.

King Alfred. How can I comfort thee, my
Gweneline?

Ah, how indeed? but let us to the court;
Thy sire awaits thee there.

Gweneline. He is released?

King Alfred. At my command, the Danes have set
him free;

The Queen's most anxious, too, to have thee with
her,

So let us leave at once this joyless place.

(The scene closes.)

ACT V.

SCENE I.—*The King's vill, a room of state. Enter from one side King Alfred, Queen Elswitha, Ealdorman Wyttekin, nobles, ladies, and attendants; from the other Athelstane and retinue.*

King Alfred. We give thee cordial welcome, royal brother,

Our brother now indeed, as linked to us
In the common waters of our faith; and you
Our allies Danish, greetings everyone.
We think this is a very joyous hour
For Dane and Saxon; may they ever grasp
Th' undivided hand of mutual amity—
Such is, O Athelstane, my dearest hope.

Queen Elswitha. I wish thee, too, all plenteous happiness,

And am much joyed to see thee, sir.

Athelstane. O king,

And royal lady, grateful thanks. And now,
Voiced in this fair and noble audience,
I take this timely opportunity
T' express for fellow Danes and for myself,
Our lively sense of gratefulness to you
For your propitious treatment of a foe,
Whom ye have vanquished—valiantly withal;
And in this Presence cry our Danish wish,
Long live King Alfred and his gracious queen.

King Alfred. Sir, we are much affected;
We thank thee both for England and ourselves,
And we do echo that thy gentle wish,
Long days and prosperous to King Athelstane.
And as our Witan, with accordant voice,
Is with us in our hope that thou wilt bear
The sceptre of sovreignty with us
In this our realm of England,—boundaries
And kindred questions being sure advised
Thee,—it is verily our trust, my lord,
That smiling Peace may be thy portion there;
That armature, which for despoiling war
Has been unhooked, may serve an holier end,
E'en to the tilling and enpasturage
Of this thrice ravaged and unwedded soil,—
For to the which the Hallowed Words direct us.
I certainly think, if in a loving bond
Our people do but strive, they will build up
The sinews of a mighty nation.

Athelstane. Great Majesty of England, we are thine,
Thy well contented servants as thy debtors;
And with thee hope that our two nations may
Live ever for this end.

King Alfred. Our thanks once more.
But, sir, before we part, and very loath
We are to do so, with this company,
These pleasant courtesies, and warm desires,
For a congenial sphere to exercise
The knightly temper in all feats of arms,
We, in the sacred name of Righteousness,
Beg thee to witness, royal Athelstane,
And all here present, that we do proclaim
Osric, a jarl of your entrainment, sir,
A sorry knave, a most unhallowed villain.

Our answering accusation now we lodge:
 It is, my lord, a canon spirit-writ
 Of righteous nations 'gainst the which thy jarl
 Has pitted his unhappy soul,—to wit,
 He bribed a servant of our well-beloved,
 Lord Wyttekin, an English Ealdorman,
 Whom we commend to thee as our good friend,
 Right trusty, and esteemed of us—my lord?

Wyttekin. I take this as an honour.

Guthrum. And I, eke,

And seek a friendly knowledge of thee, sir.

King Alfred. Thy jarl was thus enabled, noble
 prince,

To force the castle, and as prisoners
 Secure the persons of this honourable lord,
 His daughter, and her kinswoman, Lady Guilda;
 And, as thou know'st, unto the Danish camp
 Had them delivered. In his hot despite,
 Against the Lady Gweneline, I learn,
 He there did violent doings—persecuted her,
 In fine, till 'gainst her negative will, expressed
 Continuous, she should consent his wedded wife
 To be;—the termination, my good lord:
 Our plucky cousin's opposition riled
 Thy jarl so, that he made unholy threat
 To violate her honour; this, in person,
 We were of timely vantage to make void.
 Now we, O Prince, embodying England's power,
 Make known our royal wish, nay our demand:—
 Though 'tis within our right to punish him,
 Thy jarl be brought forthwith, and by thee, sir,
 Before the bar of justice.

Beowulf to Edwy. Ho! the king,
 My friend, is mighty angered.

Edwy. And with cause:

It was an evil deed, by all the saints.

Athelstane. My lord the king, and thou, O
Ealdorman,

With poignant pain, I've heard these naughty
deeds

Of that our countryman; yet listen, sirs,

I vow on Christian honour that I wist

Me naught anent the fellow's subtlety.

The lady lived as his acknowledged mistress—

Or so the rumour ran; I taxed him with't:

Quoth he, "'Tis true, but she is difficult,"

His words, "To tame." I thought no further on't.

I also, sirs, have suffered much through him;

But in my joy at entering, though so late,

The portals of our blessed Christian faith,

I pardoned him his crimes,—my thoughts thereto

Constrained by his fair shew of penitence;

For there is wrought in him, my lords, a change

So wondrous that ye scarce could give it credence:

As tameless as the peevish sea, erstwhile,

He's now as ductile as the gentle lamb;

But as he has been banished from this land,

His instant purpose is to sail for Rome,

There, in a holy Brotherhood, to end

His days.

King Alfred (drily). A very sudden turn, I trow.

Queen Elswitha. But royal brother, I would ask, is
this,

Dost not consider, a well-seeming mask,

Behind which is fresh wickedness prepared?

Athelstane. No, lady, it is not hypocrisy,

I feel assured of this, for I have seen

The Saxon priest who waited on the jarl,

And he makes union of my good report.

King Alfred. Pray, dost thou know his name?

Athelstane. Offa, I'm told.

King Alfred. That holy man! then this report is true—

And here, I see, the spoke-of person comes:

(Enter Offa.)

O father, we are all much joyed to see thee.

Offa. My duty to you, dread my liege, and lady;
My lord of Denmark, greeting.

King Alfred. Say, O father,

Art thou the herald of some joyous news?

Thy looks evince the same.

Offa. Ah yes, my lord.

To bring glad tidings for you I come here:

Scan this your grace.

(Handing him a note.)

King Alfred. Your leave, O gentles all.

(Reads.)

Glad tidings, father! 'Tis beyond belief.

What saith our queen?

(He hands the note to her.)

Queen Elswitha. The vouchers of mine eyes

Must be at fault; what think'st thou of it, sir.

(Passing it to Ealdorman Wyttekin.)

Wyttekin. I am afeard it cannot be the truth.

King Alfred. O gentles all, this missive, ye must know,

Is the causement of astonied joy to us,

And will be so to you, I trow. Its gist

Make us acquaint that the Lord Ceawlin,

Whom late we grieved for, is not dead at all.

He was mistook in the past war for Widolt,

The valiant thegn; but did receive, O sirs,
 Some nasty hurts there, which made necessary
 Retirement till the time that they were healed.
 The hapless thegn was, as now known to us,
 The very replication of the other
 In feature, form and stature. England grieves
 Full sore the costly loss of her brave son.
 God rest his soul!

Courtier to another. Who was this Widolt, sir?

Second Courtier. I wot but this, he was a worthy
 wight.

King Alfred. My Queen, O Prince, and thou, Sir
 Wyttekin,

More speech of this anon, I beg; meantime
 The lists are calling for you, allied sirs,
 With manly bouts, and all fair trials of strength
 To glad the warrior heart—say'st thou, my lord?

Wyttekin. The field is ready, Sire the King.

King Alfred. Thine ear—(*whispering Offa*)

My ghostly father, thou wilt see to it?

Offa. With all despatch and joyfully, my lord.

(*Exit.*)

King Alfred. Now, gentles, prithee, to the tourna-
 ment:

Thou wilt attend us, princely Athelstane?

Athelstane. With eagerness, great sir.

(*Exeunt King Alfred, Queen Elswitha, Athelstane,
 Wyttekin, &c.*)

(*Enter Gweneline.*)

Gweneline. Why am I here, I wonder,—why? Ah
 yes,

They tell me I shall meet with a surprise—
 How dazed I am! surprise! I care not for one

Or good or ill: Ah me! surprise, surprise.
 What can surprise me—naught; for they that
 bide

Aye in the eye of Death, who gaze on him
 With love, and hate not his uncomely face,
 Nay, long for his embrace: what can surprise
 Such one, when the surprise of all surprises
 It fails to do so—ah! the would-be wonder!

(Steps are heard without, enter Ceawlin.)

Ceawlin. Gweneline!

Gweneline. Who—who art thou?

Ceawlin. Alas!

Gweneline. O, are my faculties in that twilight state
 That hesitates on the borderland of dreams?
 Or hath my mind, unhinged from Reason, lost
 Itself in sweets of phantasy—as a child
 That, loosed from kind maternal guidance, plays
 With parlous joys—ah, hath it come to this?

Ceawlin. Nay, nay, no phantasy, love; Behold a
 wight

Of good quick parts and form terrestrial,—
 Thy lover, Gwen., in sooth, e'en Ceawlin.

Gweneline. 'Tis but a dream I fear me—

Ceawlin. Wellaway!

A dream!—in faith, its essence is too gross,
 Thy lover, dear one, too material.

How now? How now?

Gweneline. Ah, it is even so.

Support me, sir, my heart 'tis faint with joy.

Ceawlin. Rest on this bosom, sweet,

Take't for thy haven and thy rest for aye.

The storms of woe have swept o'er thy frail bark

Their vengeful ire; but never shall they wrest

Thee more from this fond heart, His name be
blest!

How pale thy lips, love, wasted sore thy frame.

(*Embracing her.*)

Gweneline. I scarce yet think I am not dreaming: Joy
Is such a wanton elf, her merry face
She shews me for one moment—lo! the next
'Tis vanished; but, my dearest, I much yearn
To know how rumour has it thou art dead?

Ceawlin. Then, know, my love, I on the battlefield
Received such hurts, that on the brink I stood
Of death its precipice, and, love, I would,
To follow up the figure, into th' abyss
Have fallen rapidly but for my page,
Who, with devotion wondrous to behold,
Healed all the cracked joints—beshrew my heart!
I pondered much how came he by such skill;
In man I ne'er have seen the like afore.

Gweneline. Thy page—thy page—O tell me is—he
here?

Ceawlin. Alas, my love, I wis not where he bides:
So soon as I did rise from illness' couch,
I found him gone—no trace, not e'en Farewell
He left behind for my sore grieving heart;
For in my mind, love, I was treasuring up
Sweet thoughts of how I should reward him—
stay!

I had forgot, he writ these lines for me.

(*reading*)

To the virtuous Ceawlin, Ealdorman,
these.

I am keenly sorrowed, O my master,
to leave thee thus. That thy pardon thou

wilt grant me, know, my mind 'tis very uneaseful; and, therefore, seek I the healing quiet of a religious house. There, on the lifting up of hands thou wilt ever be my petition to the Eternal Throne. I give thee a last Good Even in this life, with humble thanks for thy well treatment of me.

Ceawlin. And here's a note for thee—dost know the youth?

Gweneline. O, I will answer thee anon, my lord.

(*Reading.*)

Afore this reaches thee, O cousin, I shall have donned for aye the holy veil of sisterhood; therefore do not seek me out; we never more shall meet below: the nightless climes only can unite us. Farewell, and think of thy unhappy kinswoman with what gentleness thou canst.

Reward well thy servant, Oswald, I pray thee.

Gweneline (*aside*). My woman's wit tells me she loved my lord!

These letters, her strange haviour, all point to't.

(*Aloud*) Forgive, poor lady, ah, she says forgive!

My love, do angels need forgiveness?—no.

Alas, my coz., this is a scowling cloud

In our bright heaven of bliss:—Beloved, tell,

Thou knowest now who was thy page?

Ceawlin. Ah me,

I oft-times mused how came that tender flower
Amidst our rude surroundings. Shall I ne'er
Be able, love, to pay my grateful debt,

And thank her for her gentle care for me?
Can we not stay this step?—O we must try.

Gweneline. Ah, no, I fear me it would be in vain:
Ne'er have I known her change her yea or nay.—
My sweetest Guilda, who could not love thee?
So gentle and withal accomplishèd;
Without or guile or envy; in thy trials,
Ne'er with a harsh word on thy meek kind lips;
And thou wouldst shut in some grim nunnery
The newly opened lids of thy life's bud!
My soul is heavy for thee, dearest heart.—
And yet I know, I feel it, Ceawlin:
A subtle essence links her soul with mine;
As I have firm, ineffable assurance,
That the beloved dead in God are near,
Are hovering o'er us, watchful of our weal—
Yea, even she my mother, O my mother!

(*Enter King Alfred.*)

King Alfred. How—how, Sir Ceawlin? 'tis passing
strange!

A vanished spirit visiting once more
Its cast-off fleshly dwelling!—but, I ween,
'Tis very welcome. Ah, my well-loved friend,
I am o'erjoyed to see thee, yea, indeed;
Thy health, my lord, thou feelst no hurt, I trust?

Ceawlin. I thank thee kindly; none whate'er your
grace,
I'm every whit restored.

King Alfred. Great joyance, sir,
Thou giv'st me by those words—but lovers, why!
I came to spy all blithesome laughter writ
On both your faces—why these shades of gloom?
Have contraried e'en thus early—fie, O fie!

Gweneline. O no, my liege,
We have just learned that our dear cousin,
Guilda,
Hath donned for aye the veil of sisterhood,
And thus bereft us of the gentlest maid
This world can boast.

King Alfred. So young! so beautiful!
Alas, she would have made a worthy help-meet
For some well-fortuned man and graced his
board,
And joyed all eyes.—Ah, maybe, Gweneline,
Some grievous ill has chilled her gentle heart?
In human hearts there are such depths as no one
But God can probe aright, as thou well know'st;
And yet we should remember, Gweneline,
The Lady Guilda's loaned herself to God,
And, therefore, should we sorrow overmuch?—
Ah, this old world of ours is very stale:
The freshening balm of such a one is rare—
How rare! so the old beldame welcomes it
With grateful joy; and thus it should expand
And waft its sweetness far and near.
But Gweneline, and thou, Sir Ceawlin,
As day by day my life is lengthened out,
This truth comes clearer to my mental eye:
The eager bird of pleasure's ne'er without
Some staying cord of gloom, nor is joy's tree
Conditioned by no parasite.—But, friends,
There is another matter for your ears;
The Danish jarl, Osric, is at the court,
And sues for your forgiveness ere he sails,
With penitential purpose, for far Rome;
I know that ye will see him,—shall I bid
Him in?

Gweneline. O yes, my liege, an't please thee, do.

(Exit King Alfred.)

We must forgive, my lord; it will be hard,
I know, to do so, yet we must.

Ceawlin. My love,

Forgiveness is for thee to grant; do thou
The music that thy kind, good heart desires.

(Enter Osric, he kneels.)

Gweneline. Nay, rise, O jarl, I pray; we are not gods
That thou shouldst kneel to us; rise, sir, we beg,

Osric. Nay, I am too unworthy e'en to kneel
To thee; I would these boards were e'en base mire,
That I might better prove my contrite soul.

Gweneline. Kind sir, do rise; we cannot listen, else.

Osric. Nay, lady, not afore I cry, forgive.

Gweneline. Speak not the word! forgiveness, sir, thou
hadst,

Ere thou had asked for it.

Osric. Speech fails me, lady,

To thank thee for this graciousness, and, sir,

(To Ceawlin.)

I stand in need of thy forgiveness, eke.

Ceawlin. Nay, man, we both forgive thee heartily,
And not a whit of malice bear against thee.

Osric. My mind's at rest; I can depart in peace.—
Yet ere I go, I crave your patience for a space,
So you would have the history of my life,—
For to this end, that I may shew the birth
And growth which coloured my designs toward
you;

But not, O pair, to justify my sins.

My early youth was cared for by a priest
Of saintly parts and learned. As a dam

With eye solicitous tents her tender young,
 Fearful of evil happening to them,
 The holy man watched o'er the Christian seed
 Which he had planted in this graceless heart;
 And in a seasonable time I was baptized,
 And e'en continued faithful—for a space:
 But soon well-doing it did weary me.
 The viking blood within me made me lust
 For those fierce pleasures in the winsome shape
 Of the great ventures, Saxons, which our braves
 Sailed on; returning with their tales of lands
 Delightful, waiting but the grasped out arm.
 These filled my boyish mind until, in fine,
 Against my sainted mother's anguished prayers,
 Her tears and groans, I joined a company,—
 Its leader ye have christened Athelstane;
 And I became the fiercest of them all:
 I turned my back on the sweet face of goodness.
 My heart at first, though, loathed th' unholy
 sights

Of rapine and most bloody slaughter—O!
 I soon had tidings of my mother's death.—
 Now, I do ask, is there in this broad world
 A blessing more acute than a fond mother's?

Gweneline. Now true, a mother's love!—bereft of
 that,

The children see the world is all unstrung.
 Pray, sir, proceed; o'erlook this breaking in.

Osric. To choke remorse and sorrow, Saxon pair,
 I wallowed deeper in the slough of sin;
 And then, O gracious lady, I saw thee:
 The rest I speak not, 'tis well known to thee.
 The only plea my shame puts forth is this—
 I loved thee O so dear; and when your Prince

And thou, Lord Ceawlin, were at our tents,
 Mine ears o'erheard the words which were my
 doom.

Thy lover I did vow to foully slay,
 Or, mayhap, fairly.—Now hear ye a marvel.
 In the past war there was a Saxon thegn
 Whose features were so like to thine, my lord,
 That thine own mother would have stood amazed,
 Not knowing one from t'other—ah, poor thegn!
 I pinked him dead,—his blood upon my soul!
 And, shame on shame, I hasted then to thee.
 Lady, thy scorn was well directed.

Gweneline. O!

No more, no more; efface it from thy mind,
 I charge thee, sir.

Osric. Ah, lady, pardon me.—

Your king, I love him for that gallant deed:
 He hath a heart to joy all warriors.
 When I was prisoned, Saxons, for my faults
 Against the Danish Athelstane, Remorse
 It seized me with its inward eating tooth;
 A voice seemed ever ringing in mine ear
 Repent! then I much yearned for fellow wights
 To commune with; and God He heard my prayer:
 A kindly Saxon priest came to me; spake
 Of the aye blessed Hope which cheers the soul.
 As some sweet strain learned in our childhood
 days,
 Forgotten in our prime, returns once more,—
 With pleasure-pain my long lost faith came back
 To me; Ah yes, and in its golden stream
 My spirit bathed, till I did shout for joy.
 The Prince has turned his face from all my crimes
 And to an holy brotherhood at Rome

I now direct my steps. O Christian pair,
Pray, pardon me this tedious round of words,
And though I scarce dare ask it, my black deeds
To both of you.

Gweneline. Alas, that thou shouldst ask it!
Sir, we are sinful wights, not one, but all,
As saith the Holy Writ; we must forgive;
Forgiveness is an act as necessary
As 'tis we breathe. I would have thee in mind
That in the dreadful scales of God, our sins
Are balanced 'gainst our actions done for others:
An we have no forgiveness for our fellows,
We truly have no leverage at all;—
Nay, sir, we are all Christians: 'tis enow.
We hope, my lord and I, that thou wilt grace
Our nuptial banquet?

Osric. Lady, and thou, sir,
Large is my wish to be at that bright feast—
Alas! the morn I fill my sail for Rome.
May Fortune smile her brightest and her best,
And may her wheel, for thee, ne'er turn but that
It blessings richly showers.

Gweneline. It grieves me, sir,
That thou canst not bide longer, fare-thee-well,
And Heaven bless thee aye.

Ceawlin. And so say I,
We may not meet again in this world, sir:
All happiness go with thee in thy ways.

Osric. Ah, blessings on you for this kindness, friends.

(*Exit Osric.*)

Gweneline. Dear heart, I have been thinking, all this
while,
That our afflictions must be sent by God,

The sweetly incensed plant of happiness
To nourish, and to make the gracious root
Strike deeper in our hearts—ah, here's the king.

(*Re-enter King Alfred.*)

King Alfred. What think ye of the jarl, O friends?

Gweneline. My liege,

Was ever wight so changed? He did reveal
The piteous story of his life to us—

'Twas wondrous; at each word he sighed; he
prayed

Forgive—so oft, that like th' uneasy bell
Hung on the kine, it shewed how went his mind.

King Alfred. Ah yes, I've learned his tale; but, O
my friends,

The queen and all the court await you both,
To give their congratulations.

Gweneline. Let us, first,

Give thee our lowly thanks,—not from the lips
Alone, but from the parent heart, my liege,
For that which thou hast done for us.

King Alfred. Tut, tut,

That has been naught.

Gweneline. Not so to us, my lord;

But links of love and loyalty to bind
Us ever to thee, hast thou forged for us;
And we would beg thy blessing, good my liege.

King Alfred. An He will heed His servant's hearty
prayer,

Large is my hope that Heaven's high Majesty,
For whom I am an embassy below,
Most, most unworthy, may on you shed down
Th' auspicious haviour of His holy eye;
May bright prosperity be at the helm
Of your life's ship; the rudder, love eternal.

Gweneline. O, sir, our hearts are full of thanks to thee.

We take our leave.

King Alfred. Then for the nonce, adieu.

(Exeunt Gweneline and Ceawlin.)

Thus God, in His mysterious dispensation,
Is oftentimes pleased that Sorrow, big with babe,
Should in her throes of anguish travail long
Ere Joy, her glorious child be born;—sure then,
The joyous Present vanishes the Past—

As I have seen some goodly bird swoop down
And beak its carrion prey, which, swallowed up,
Doth also serve its beauteous captor's growth.
And thus It Was adds lustre on It Is.

O England, England, much loved spouse, thy
hurts,

Please God, will be but dreams when Morning
breaks;

For He will heal thee; He will make thee whole.

Benedic, anima mea, Domino:
et omnia, quae intra me sunt,
Nomini sancto eius.

Mine eye, mine eye is on the wings of Time,
I see the blissful sight! her countless ships
They roam the Ocean, bringing her merchandise
From sea to sea; and, lo! she shall be blessed;
Great glory hers! The girdle of her power
Extends from clime to clime unceasingly;
To wield the sword victorious to her
Is given—not for the lust of empery,
But rather for a wider peace, a peace
Embracing divers peoples. Mighty pens

To foster heavenly love and gentleness;
Wise senators, and ever nobler hearts
The ages bring her; great-souled warriors.

Then, in the future dim, how black soe'er
The former night, that Dawn will surely rise,
Benign with promise of the greater Day
Of nations, wherein Peace, sad mein'd no longer,
Will raise her eyes and smile; will give to men
Those fuller and serener interests,
Those joys that bring Earth nearer to high
Heaven,
Which, as I take it, is the end of ends.



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